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## The Impact of Principal Preparation on Student Outcomes

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Product II: Problem of Practice Inquiry

THE IMPACT OF PRINCIPAL PREPARATION ON STUDENT OUTCOMES

By Tanya N. Shelton

An Applied Dissertation

Submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

SOUTHERN METHODIST UNIVERSITY

Department of Education Policy and Leadership

Simmons School of Education and Human Development

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## **Executive Summary**

The purpose of this study was to understand the role of principal preparation on first-year principals' ability to positively impact student outcomes. The study sought to understand key learning experiences that contributed to first-year principals' success upon completion of their preparation program. Using the case study method for this qualitative research study, I interviewed first-year principals to gather data on their perceptions of the learning experiences that led to their success. The research question that guided my qualitative research study was: How does one district led principal preparation program in a large urban city increase first-year principals' capacity to effectively lead a campus and produce positive outcomes?

The study highlighted six best practices that all university-based preparation programs and alternative principal pipelines should implement to enhance its participants' learning experiences and their ability to successfully impact student outcomes within their first academic year of the principalship. The themes that emerged from the study as compelling learning experiences to build instructional leadership that impacted student outcomes were: data analysis, observation and feedback, and professional learning communities. Themes based on unexpected challenges during their first year as principals serve as gaps in their learning that would enhance all preparation programs. Those themes were: non-instructional systems related to campus operations, soft skills, and transitioning to the principalship. Based on the theoretical framework created from the literature, field-experience and on-the-job support served as meaningful experiences for the preparation of aspiring leaders. Because principals play a crucial role in a campus's success or failure, aspiring leaders must be adequately prepared to lead a campus. Thus, this study contributes to the literature on principal preparation programs.

## THE IMPACT OF PRINCIPAL PREPARATION ON STUDENT OUTCOMES

### **Statement of the Problem**

Despite the recognized importance of principal preparation, scholars and policymakers have recently been claiming that the existing preparation programs are out of touch with reality and fail to impart their participants in what it takes to successfully lead a school today (Kearney & Valadez, 2015; VanTuyle and Reeves, 2014 as cited by Shaked and Schechter 2017). The effectiveness of principal preparation programs (PPPs) has been questioned and continues to be a concern. Perceived shortfalls in extant PPPs have prompted some districts and cities to construct their own principal “readiness” programs to supplement PPP coursework, adding hands-on experience, mentoring, and training in district-specific information and initiatives (Zubrzycki, 2012; Turnbull & Haslam, 2010 as cited by Dodson 2015).

The role of the principal in public schools has shifted over the years to focus on student achievement. Principal training is still in the process of shifting to meet the demands of school districts. As early as 2006, reports show that states are moving toward making recommendations for improvement of PPPs by redefining standards and the principal’s role in leading schools (Shelton, 2012, p. 7). The 2012 National Conference of State Legislatures reports, “*Preparing a Pipeline of Effective Principals: A Legislative Approach*” outlined the timeline for when states began to inquire about standards for principal preparation programs, as well as how they are evaluated. The focus on changing principal pipeline training is to make efforts to prepare better principals to impact student outcomes positively, becoming strong instructional and transformational leaders of schools. Too often, programs, especially university-based ones where the majority of school leaders are trained, inadequately prepare future principals for the challenges that will face them, most notably in schools with high needs (Gill, 2012, p. 24).

According to Dodson (2015), “Nationwide, school officials have criticized college and university PPPs for not ensuring that graduates are ready to assume the principalship” (p. 2). Principal pipelines should adequately prepare aspiring principals to improve student achievement and turn around tough schools. Critics scrutinize university-based principal preparation programs and school districts’ ability to develop a principal pipeline that adequately prepares aspiring principals to improve student achievement and turn around tough schools. Increasingly, states are revising licensure and certification requirements to focus more explicitly on evidence of knowledge and skill, rather than on classroom experience and credentials (Shelton, 2012). Principal preparation programs are making the shift to internship and field experiences to prepare aspiring leaders for success. In the research article by Dodson (2015), it states, “Field experiences are defined as those activities principal candidates perform as part of their principal preparation coursework and tied directly to administrator responsibilities as performed on a daily basis and from PPP course requirements and activities”. Likewise, Lochmiller and Chestnut (2017) believe that “Many preparation programs do not provide adequate field experiences to prepare aspiring principals for the rigors or complexity of principal leadership, let alone the demands of turning around struggling schools”. Further research on the training and experiences provided in highly effective preparation programs with specific focus on urban schools serving students with high needs, could help to make an impact on future programs. In *Within the Accountability Era: Principals’ Instructional Leadership Behaviors and Student Achievement*, Donell and White (2005) states, “Although numerous studies have investigated the relationship between instructional leadership and behaviors of principals and student achievement, most have not been conducted in an environment as politically driven as the current assessment-based educational system” (p. 56). There was a need to research the effectiveness of principal preparation programs and their ability

to adequately prepare aspiring principals to be successful in leading campuses within their first academic year. This qualitative research study utilized case study interviews to evaluate the effectiveness of a district-led PPP in a large urban school district. The participants shared perceptions of how the program impacted their ability to proficiently lead a campus and positively impact student outcomes within their first academic year as principal.

There was a need to research how to evaluate the effectiveness of principal preparation programs and the best practices and strategies that are most effective in adequately preparing aspiring principals to be successful in impacting student outcomes. The goal of this research was to define standards and best practices for universities and school districts to ensure the development of highly successful principal preparation programs. The purpose of this study was to answer the question: What role do Principal Preparation Programs play in preparing aspiring leaders' ability to impact student achievement?

### **Research Question**

Principal leadership has a significant impact on student achievement. In this new era of accountability, where school leaders are expected to demonstrate bottom-line results and use data to drive decisions, the skill and knowledge of principals' matter more than ever (Hess and Kelly, 2005). They serve as gatekeepers of instructional programs, buffers between the interest of district and communities, financial managers, communication builders, visionaries, and experts in providing instructional interventions to improve student achievement data. Access to high quality training for aspiring principals is a necessity. When principals are adequately trained to lead schools, they are prepared to ensure that proficient instruction is taking place in classrooms which ultimately impacts student achievement. After reviewing the literature on training and building



principal pipelines, the following questions will guided this research study and conceptual framework:

- What kind of training and learning experiences are needed in principal preparation programs to ensure that aspiring leaders are successful in the principal role?
- How has the principal role evolved?
- How does instructional leadership impact student outcomes?
- How are principals supported upon exit of principal preparation programs?

The overall research question that will guide this qualitative study is:

**How does one district led principal preparation program in a large urban city increase first year principals' capacity to effectively lead a campus and produce positive outcomes?**

### **Researcher's Background**

For over twenty years, I've served as a public-school educator in the role of teacher, assistant principal, principal, and now an executive director/principal supervisor. I had a successful tenure as principal obtaining positive student outcomes and ranked in the highest quintile in district administered climate surveys each year. In preparation for the principalship, I participated in graduate coursework to earn a master's degree in educational administration and principal certification. I received additional training as a member of the first cohort of the Aspiring Principals Program through Dallas ISD. The cohort experience and hands-on learning provided me with the preparation I needed to become a successful principal. Engaging in learning and serving at a campus that was led by a Master Principal sharpened my skills and provided me with additional learning opportunities as an aspiring principal.

This topic of research related to principal preparation is near and dear to my heart because leadership is my passion. In my twenty years as an educator, I've seen successful principals, and

I've seen the fall of principals who were not adequately prepared to lead a campus. It is my sincere belief that when principals are adequately prepared, students are successful. If we as public-school educators gain an understanding of the training needed to prepare principals, we would have the ability to create principal pipelines with candidates who can step into the principal role to improve student achievement or maintain success when vacancies arise or when new campuses are founded.

## Review of Literature

This literature review was organized around three primary strands: the concept of instructional leadership, the structure of PPPs, and the role of mentoring and “on the job” support. The first two strands were each further divided into sub-strands discussed below. The first literature strand dealt with the concept of instructional leadership and was divided into two strands: the evolution of the principal role and the impact of instructional leadership on student outcomes. In a study on restructuring instructional leadership, Neumerki et. al. (2018) found that the change from managerial positions in principalship to instructional duties involve growing teachers, ensuring campus success based on student achievement and accountability ratings, and training teachers based on the instructional needs of the campus. Previously, principals were more engaged in operational duties such as managers of staff, enforcers of student discipline, budget managers, attendance, scheduling, etc. Now, principals are primarily responsible for student learning, aligning curriculum, data analysis, and assessments. About the role of school leaders, Neumerki et. al. (2018) state, “Managing the daily operations of their schools is insufficient; present day principals are expected to engage closely with teaching and learning.” Consequently, new principals must be prepared to serve as instructional leaders who can influence the quality of instruction and enhance student achievement.

The second strand of the literature focused on the pathways to the principalship through principal preparation programs. This strand was divided into two main components. The first component of the literature strand focused on university-based principal preparation programs. University-based programs are an important topic because they serve as a more traditional program where candidates receive a Master’s Degree and principal certification. An internship is usually a requirement of the university-based programs to allow participants to gain experiences that prepare

them for the principalship. The programs tend to focus on ensuring that program participants receive credentials needed to become campus leaders.

The second component of this literature strand focused on alternative principal preparation programs. The alternative programs have been primarily created by school districts based on needs and by non-profit organizations that focus on instructional leadership and turnaround practices. One of the primary purposes of the alternative principal preparation programs is the criticism over university-based programs' ability to prepare graduates to turn around tough schools adequately. Campanotta et al. (2018) states, "The majority (89%) of participants of conventional, university-based programs claim that the programs failed to prepare them for the rigors of real practice" (as cited by Braun et al., 2011; Levine, 2005, p. 221.)

Principal preparation programs have evolved and upgraded competencies to address the need for high-quality training and job-embedded experiences in response to criticism based on the research from Corcoran (2012) about New York City's Aspiring Principals Program. Both types of principal preparation programs will be compared and contrasted for critical features that prepare new principals to become instructional leaders. Significant features of programs were identified within the research to determine characteristic features that ensure that aspiring leaders are adequately prepared to become principals in urban school districts, even at tough schools. Many school districts and universities are beginning to partner and take joint responsibility for training aspiring leaders. The literature will speak to how programs prepare instructional leaders to meet the needs of public schools.

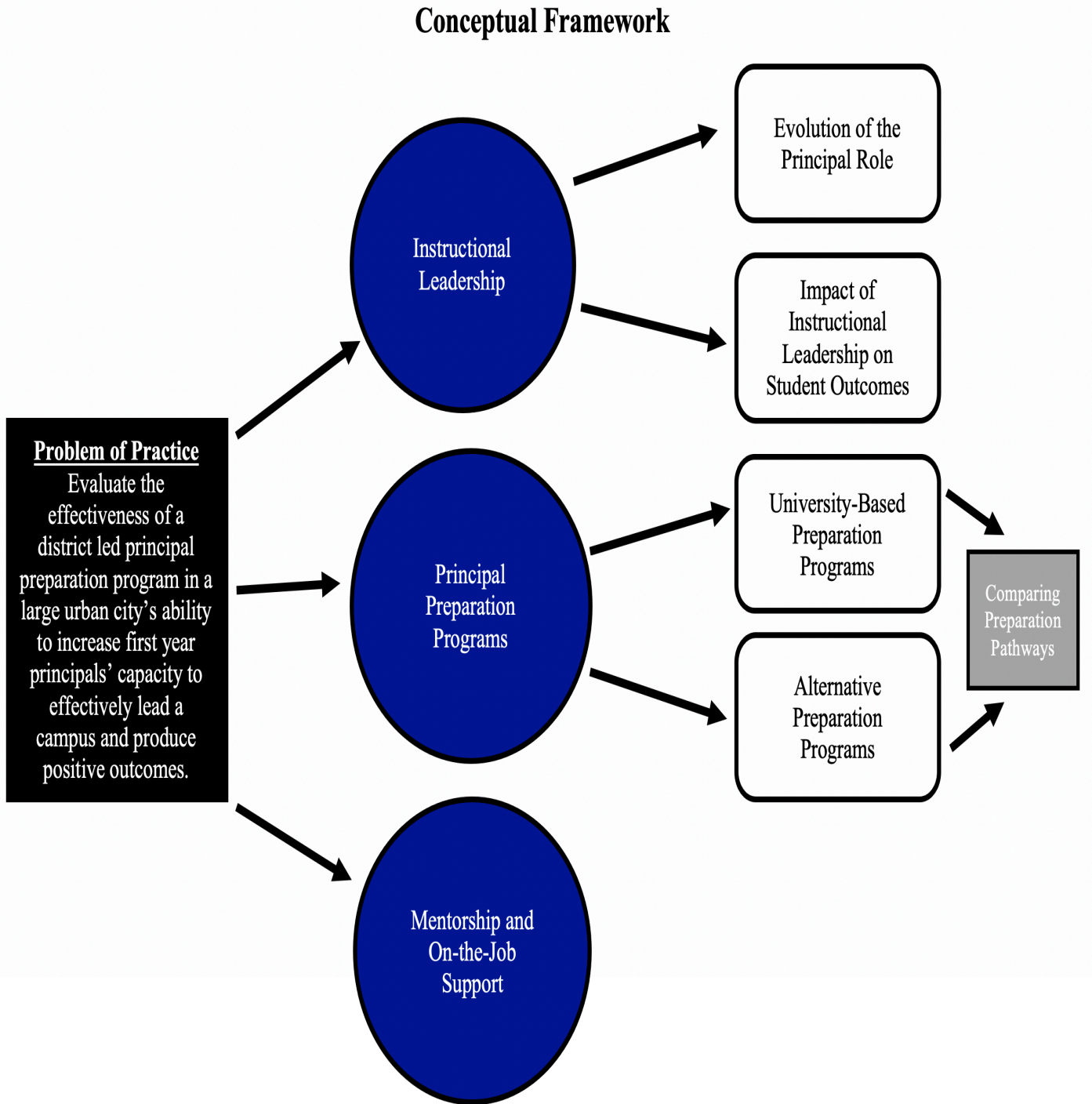
The third and final literature strand pertained to mentorship and on-the-job support for new principals. The research shows that training and obtaining credentials are not enough for novice

principals to be successful. Principal preparation programs are not able to prepare new principals for every experience they will encounter during their first academic year, leading a campus.

Principals are continuously challenged to navigate human capital, financial resources, political/social context, and lead with integrity while still managing the instructional program with high accountability for student outcomes. They are expected to navigate change and perform at a high level regardless of experience. Consistent evaluations of new principals based on their on-the-job performance allow for prescriptive support and individualized coaching based on the needs of the new principal and the demands of the campus they are serving.

Mentorship is an essential component of ongoing improvement and support of novice principals. Upon exit from programs, new principals should have assigned mentors with specific roles and responsibilities to gain trust and support new principals in a non-evaluative way. To ensure that new principals are prepared to improve teaching and learning beyond preparation programs, mentorship must be a priority (Gray, 2007). Based on the literature review, a conceptual framework for analyzing principal preparation is summarized into three main areas: instructional leadership, principal preparation programs, and mentoring/support for new principals.

**Table 1: Conceptual Framework**



## **Instructional Leadership**

### **Evolution of the Principal Role**

The role of the instructional leader is a relatively new concept that emerged in the early 1980s, which called for a shift of emphasis from principals being administrators to being instructional or academic leaders (Plessis, 2013). The principal role has evolved in the past four to five decades. In *Preparing Instructional Leaders*, Ylimaki et al. (2011) trace the origins of instructional leadership back to the nineteenth century. Hallinger (1992) attributes the evolution of the principal role to curriculum reform in the 1960s and 1970s, which caused principals to focus on compensatory education, bilingual education, education for the disabled, and assistance with staff development and classroom support. As a result of the evolution, principals became known as the primary source of development and knowledge of campus instructional programs.

Reforms to improve student achievement has increased the demands on school leaders. Consequently, principals must have knowledge and training on instructional systems due to high accountability for impacting student outcomes. For instance, Gill (2012) sums up how the modern principalship, particularly in troubled urban schools, is a new kind of job, one no longer centered on books, boilers, and busses. Over the years, principals have transitioned from being managers to instructional leaders. As a result of reforms from the United States Department of Education, such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), Race to the Top, and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), schools have mandates related to state testing. “More recent reforms driven by the accountability movement in education have placed everyone, including school leaders, “on notice” that the only fully satisfactory justification for what they do is its contribution to student achievement” (Ylimaki et al., 2011).

In this new era of accountability, where school leaders are expected to demonstrate bottom-line results and use data to drive decisions, the skill and knowledge of principals matter more than ever (Hess and Kelly, 2005). Principals must have some understanding of curriculum and best practices that are utilized and monitored in classrooms to impact student outcomes. Furthermore, Corcoran (2017) concludes that “The increasing emphasis on accountability for student performance implies that principals need to be knowledgeable of instruction in core curriculum areas.” Given the importance of instructional leadership within the evolving principal role, it is crucial to address the impact of instructional leadership on academic achievement. The next section will explore the relationship between instructional leadership in schools and student outcomes.

### **Impact of Instructional Leadership on Student Outcomes**

As an instructional leader, the principal plays a pivotal role in the school by affecting the quality of individual teacher instruction, the height of student achievement, and the degree of efficiency in school functioning (Plessis, 2013). In contrast, Day et al (2016) states, “Despite the consensus on the important influence of school leaders on student outcomes, the ways in which leadership effects have been analyzed vary considerably, depending on the variables and research designs adopted by researchers to study the nature and significance of particular aspects of school leadership in improving student outcomes .”

As pressure for improving student performance in the current standards-based accountability environment swells and test results are increasingly scrutinized, school principals are being urged to focus efforts on the core business of schooling – teaching and learning (Plessis, 2013). To illustrate, common themes in the literature mentioned that having a vision for curriculum and instruction in classrooms serves as a first step for instructional leaders to make an impact on



student outcomes. Moreover, Grisby et al. (2010) state that “In order to successfully fulfill the roles and responsibilities of leadership, instructional leaders must have a vision of what they want the school to become”. Plessis (2013) defines components of instructional leadership as focusing on instructional improvement, using data to drive instruction, developing a clear vision of the instructional program, and creating instructional expectations for each classroom. Neumerki et al. (2018) cite observation and feedback, knowing what good instruction is, and using data and making adjustments as components of instructional leadership. Last, Grisby et al. (2010) recommend data discussions and action plans, professional development, observation and feedback (walkthroughs), model lessons, and having a vision of curriculum and instruction as strategies for implementation of instructional leadership. With the principal role involving instructional leadership to impact student outcomes, there are implications for principal preparation programs. Principal preparation programs that pay little attention to data, productivity, accountability, or working with parents may leave their graduates unprepared for new responsibilities (Hess and Kelly, 2005). Overall, “the expectation that principals should be instructional leaders is now deeply ingrained in our understanding of effective school leadership” (Neumerki et al., 2018). The importance of supporting instructional leadership due to increased accountability and the evolving job expectations within the principal role have implications for principal preparation programs. The following section will provide an analysis of the characteristics of principal preparation programs.

## **Principal Preparation Programs**

### **University-Based Principal Preparation Programs**

Within the literature, it was essential to gain an understanding of both university-based principal preparation programs and alternative principal preparation programs such as districts’

training aspiring principals to create principal pipelines. “For years, education scholars have voiced the opinion that leadership programs were in dire need of redirection” (Campanotta et al., 2019).

Nationwide, school officials have criticized college and university PPPs for not ensuring that graduates are ready to assume the principalship (Dodson, 2015, p. 2). The literature speaks to the criticism of university-based programs’ ability to prepare aspiring principals to be successful in turnaround schools. Lochmiller et al. (2016) states, “One of the enduring criticisms of university-based preparation programs has been their inability to effectively link theory (typically taught in coursework) with practice (typically introduced through fieldwork” (p. 87). Similarly, Dodson (2015) states, “Nationwide, school officials have criticized college and university Principal Preparation Programs (PPPs) for not ensuring that graduates are ready to assume the principalship” (p. 2). Despite the scrutiny, university-based programs are still preparing aspiring leaders for principal roles. Universities are working to make connections between coursework and field experience. The inability to translate theoretical ideas about leadership into concrete leadership actions poses a significant challenge for leaders who are leading schools faced with increasing sanctions or limited time to undertake meaningful reforms to improve student achievement (Lochmiller et al., 2016, p. 87).

University-based leadership preparation programs have the responsibility for preparing candidates to serve as school principals and in other leadership capacities (Campanotta et al., 2018, p. 219). University-based programs are moving towards adding components to support their coursework, making upgrades such as both the theoretical and evaluated field experiences for aspiring leaders. The research involving university-based programs show that principal

preparation programs should include key features. Table 1 shown below provides examples of key features.

<b>Table 2: Key Features of University-Based Principal Preparation Programs</b>			
Campanotta et. Al. (2018)	Lochmiller and Chestnut (2016)	Dodson (2015)	Lochmiller (2018)
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Selective admission (pre-selected)</li> <li>2. Application of real-time situations</li> <li>3. Collaborative Cohorts</li> <li>4. Principal Coaching and Mentorship</li> <li>5. Year-long paid internship (District Partnership)</li> <li>6. Program lasting at least 9 months</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Rigorous application process</li> <li>2. 25-day apprenticeship</li> <li>3. Mentor Principal</li> <li>4. Focus: Learning at a turnaround school</li> <li>5. Project-based learning with school reform.</li> </ol>	Field experience involving: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Curriculum</li> <li>2. Data analysis or gathering</li> <li>3. Teacher observations and evaluations</li> <li>4. Engaging in parent-related issues</li> <li>5. Shadowing an experienced principal</li> <li>6. Budget-related issues</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Leadership</li> <li>2. School policy</li> <li>3. Programs</li> <li>4. Organizational processes</li> <li>5. Staffing</li> <li>6. Classroom practices</li> <li>7. Parent and community involvement</li> <li>8. Facilities</li> </ol>

Companotta et al. conducted a qualitative study of five university-based PPPs nationally recognized for being exemplary programs to discover program quality, content, and best practices. According to Campanotta et al. (2018), although leadership programs have improved, making progress beginning in the early 2000s, there is still a need for upgrades and redesign for programs to become current in their practices. The key features are common themes found in programs that serve as models of best practices that can be used to provide direction to preparation programs, as well as an assessment of the programs (Camponatta et al., 2018). The selective admission involves pre-selected candidates who are targeted based on recommendations from the school districts believing they are suited for school leadership. The year-long paid internship allows program

participants to move from current positions such as teaching positions to campus leadership positions where they are paid to engage in learning and leading through “on the job” experience and assessments/evaluations of projects required within the coursework.

Lochmiller conducted a study of a university-based program in the Southeastern USA to gain an understanding of how behaviors from the apprenticeship equips aspiring leaders for turnaround schools. Similarly, Lochmiller et al. (2016) report key features as a rigorous application process, mentoring, and project-based learning that focuses on reform. The apprenticeship's 25-day requirement is described as a learning experience where program participants are placed in a turnaround school with high needs. The turnaround schools were described as campuses that were less affluent, more diverse, and lower performing in reference to student achievement. Mentor principals leading the campuses were selected based on district recommendations. Participants were assigned tasks and special projects anchored in school reform during the apprenticeship with input from the mentor principals. According to Lochmiller et al. (2016), the purpose of the temporary experiences during the 25-day internship was to prepare participants for the unique challenges and skill set needed to lead turnaround schools.

Dodson (2015) aligned key features with field experience and practice. The key features involving curriculum, data analysis, teacher observations and evaluations, and parent-related issues are assigned as projects and tasks within the field experience. The study differentiates between internship and field experiences. “Internships, by definition, may be more fluid and unpredictable than field experiences” (Dodson, 2015, p. 3). The internship and field experience may include the same type of activity, but internships usually require the same school setting for a semester or year. The field experiences within this study can be described in similarity to student teaching, where participants engage in on-site experiences where they are fully immersed in the

leadership position. Aspiring principals benefit from hands-on practice to step in as effective school leaders (Dodson, 2015).

Finally, in *Coaching Principals for the Complexity of School Reform*, Lochmiller (2018) added key features that connect to understanding school policy, staffing, and facilities. The key features provided go beyond the standard practices of curriculum, instruction, parental engagement, and data analysis. Through this study, Lochmiller (2018) captures coaches from a university-based program going out into the field to develop principals in urban schools. Similarly, a competitive application process was utilized to select participants serving in turnaround schools—the field experiences as project-based with onsite coaching to evaluate practice through predetermined protocols. Lochmiller (2018) described the understanding of school policy as the political factors around school reform related to resistance when working to create change that will improve turnaround schools.

In summary, the common characteristics recommended for university-based programs are the focus on leadership through coursework, field experiences, selective admission, and principal mentorship. Consequently, the amount of time allotted for the field experience as a best practice is not clearly defined.

### **Alternative Preparation Programs (Principal Pipelines)**

“One of the main arguments against principal preparation programs is that the methods of teaching used are overly didactic and not sufficiently interactive” (Shaked and Schechter, 2017, p. 86). Consequently, school districts across the country are creating principal pipelines to train aspiring principals to meet the needs of their schools. Hess and Kelly (2005) states, “Effective principal preparation ought to include significant attention to accountability, managing with data, and utilizing research; to hiring, recruiting, evaluating, and terminating personnel; to overseeing

an effective instructional program; and to exposing candidates to diverse views regarding educational and organizational management” (2007 p. 4).

Traditional principal-preparation programs typically aim to prepare current and aspiring educators to become principals through training that combines classroom instruction and some type of school-based internship. These programs usually lead to an advanced degree or certification (Gates et al., 2019, p. 8). Alternative preparation programs focus on creating principal pipelines that provide extensive internships with project-based learning opportunities. Furthermore, in *Training Your Own: The Impact of New York City’s Aspiring Principals Program on Student Achievement*, Corcoran et al. (2012) reports, “Principal training academies and other alternate routes into school leadership have grown rapidly in recent years, as traditional university-based programs have been criticized for their lack of selectivity, rigor, and practice-based curriculum” (as cited by Davis, Darling- Hammond, LaPointe, & Myerson, 2005; Hess & Kelly, 2005; Kochan, Bredeson, & Riehl, 2002; Tucker & Coddling, 2002).

Gates et al. (2019) concurred with Corcoran that effective principal-preparation programs collaborate with school districts to ensure coherence between recruitment, training, and practice; create field experiences or internships for program participants, provide feedback on graduate quality, and review the curriculum and its alignment to district standards and needs. Alternative-based programs train on specific features to create principal pipelines of aspiring principals who are prepared to lead turnaround schools. The key features in Alternative-based principal preparation programs are outlined in Table 2 below.

<b>Table 3: Key Features of Alternative-Based Principal Preparation Programs</b>			
Gates et al. (2019)	Corcoran et al. (2012)	Hess and Kelley (2007)	Shaked and Schechter (2017)

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Strong program-district partnership</li> <li>2. Selective recruitment and admission</li> <li>3. Alignment to research-based best practices</li> <li>4. Experiential learning</li> <li>5. Dates use for continuous quality improvement</li> <li>6. On-the job support after program completion</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Selectivity</li> <li>2. 10-month residency</li> <li>3. Problem-based learning</li> <li>4. Mentor principal</li> <li>5. Competencies (personal behavior, resilience, communication, student performance, situational problem-solving, supervision, management, technology)</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Managing for results</li> <li>2. Managing personnel</li> <li>3. Technical knowledge</li> <li>4. External leadership</li> <li>5. Norms and values</li> <li>6. Leadership and school culture</li> <li>7. Managing classroom instruction</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. One academic year of field experience</li> <li>2. 150 hours of internship with experienced principal</li> <li>3. 250 hours of academic study</li> <li>4. Identify problematics/successful experiences</li> <li>5. Reconstruct concrete actions</li> <li>6. Identify critical turning points</li> <li>7. Formulate principles of actions</li> <li>8. Identify unresolved issues</li> </ol>
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Gates et al. (2019) supported key features that focused on the importance of the partnership with local school districts. The goal was to align the program principals’ performance on the job in high needs schools. The main framework used for the research-based best practices throughout the program was the Transformational Leadership Framework, which is based on the Urban Excellence Framework to focus on improving student outcomes. The Experiential Learning which is another name for field experience was described by Gates et al. (2019) as “Effective principal-preparation programs also provide participants with learning experiences that expose them to problems often faced in school leadership roles, with the intent to build practical and technical knowledge” (p. 10). These learning experiences provide participants with a combination of classroom and online learning simulations and internships, leading all or portions of school operations and connecting tasks to instructional leadership.

Similarly, according to Corcoran et al. (2012), The New York City’s Aspiring Principal Program’s key features are described as problem-based learning with specific competencies, a

selection process, and residency. The field experience involves a 10-month school residency that prepares aspiring principals to lead chronically low-performing schools. During the residency, program participants are paid a starting principal salary to serve as an apprentice to a mentor principal. As a commitment to the program, applicants are asked to serve as campus leaders for at least five years.

In contrast, Hess and Kelly (2007) report key features more as managerial than leading instruction. This study's approach was a national sample of what is taught to aspiring leaders participating in principal preparation programs. In conclusion, Hess and Kelly (2007) provide evidence that many principal preparation programs focus on competencies that are not sufficiently preparing participants for the challenges faced during this era of high accountability for increasing student achievement.

Shaked and Schechter (2017) focused on a 5-step collaborative learning format involving an internship and coursework aligned with learning from success and learning from problems. “Rather than focusing on deficit-based practices, these approaches focus on discovering what works well and how success can generate a more positive course of human and organizational welfare” (Shaked and Schechter, 2017, p. 88). The cohort experience of learning from success differs from the practices as mentioned above of participants having a better understanding of struggling schools. In the same manner, the program provides an internship experience for one academic year with experienced principals for guidance and mentorship.

In summary, the cited programs have similar vital features, such as selective recruitment and a residency/internship. Most of the programs build their curriculum around high needs schools and competencies that prepare aspiring principals to lead turnaround schools based on the needs of school districts.



## **Comparing University-Based and Alternative Principal Preparation Programs**

University-based preparation programs, where the vast majority of principals are trained, have long been under intense scrutiny (Shelton, 2012, p. 1). In the same manner, Gill (2012) states, “Unfortunately, strong principal training programs remain the exception, not the rule. Too often, programs, especially university-based ones where the majority of school leaders are trained, inadequately prepare future principals for the challenges that will face them, most notably in schools with high needs” (p. 25). Although principal preparation programs in many states require upgrades in curriculum and learning experiences for aspiring principals (to meet the needs of school districts), many universities and alternative preparation programs are making changes to prepare aspiring principals to meet the demands of high needs schools. Virtually all states have taken the first step toward bolstering this type of leadership by adopting new learning centered standards that redefine the principal’s role. Some are using standards to push for long-overdue redesign of training programs (Gill, 2012, p. 25).

The most common thread across both university-based and alternative principal preparation programs was the need for an internship or field experience to prepare aspiring leaders with job-embedded training adequately. Lochmiller and Chestnut (2016) concurs that “Specifically, they found that students who experienced more effective internships rated themselves as being more comfortable addressing the political, social, economic, legal, and cultural contexts surrounding their schools; leading with fairness, integrity, and ethics; managing the school organization and creating conditions effective for learning; working with diverse communities; establishing a vision for learning; and managing the school’s instructional program”. Similarly, Dodson (2015) speaks to widespread agreement that future principals need abundant prior hands-on practice to step in as effective school leaders (p. 13). While principal preparation

programs are a crucial part of aspiring leaders' readiness, continuous support is needed after completion of preparation programs. The following section addressed the need for mentorship and job-embedded support for new principals.

### **Mentorship and On-the-Job Support**

Leadership training does not end when principals are licensed and hired. It continues with mentoring for new principals and robust, ongoing professional development that can be linked to licensure to promote career-long growth that is responsive to the evolving needs of schools and districts (Shelton, 2012). PPPs are not the final stop for aspiring leaders after they obtain their first principal position. Upon graduation or program exit, novice principals require continued support. “No matter what preparation anyone has, being the principal is not the same,” noted one new elementary school principal in New York City in a 2007 Wallace Perspective report on principal mentoring. “Nothing prepares you for the job” (The Wallace Foundation, 2007, p. 6 as cited by Gill, 2012). For instance, Gill (2012) states, “One program receiving high marks is Ohio’s Entry-Year Program for Principals, which mandates the new principals work with mentors for two years to receive a full professional license.” The literature shows that through ongoing coaching and support, school districts can evaluate new leaders to determine strengths and weaknesses, creating prescriptive training based on needs. Likewise, Shelton (2012) concurs, “The evaluation process can play an important role in targeting professional development needs for individual school leaders by identifying and prescribing appropriate training. Evaluation and support marks a significant shift from the pervasive “sink or swim” attitude toward struggling principals and serves as further recognition that leadership training should be embedded throughout a principal’s career.”

Mentoring is an ongoing process in which individuals in an organization provide support and guidance to others who become effective contributors to the goals of the organization (Daresh, 2001 cited by Garcia, 2011). Outside of training received from principal preparation programs, many new principals are left to learn on the job and can sometimes be left to “sink-or-swim” if they are poorly supported. Mentorship allows new principals to receive additional guidance and support from peers with experience and success. Due to the mentor role not being an evaluative position, mentors play a non-threatening role in examining the leadership of new principals and providing them feedback to support their work and ongoing improvement.

### **Summary**

The literature provided evidence that supports the need for improving principal preparation programs to prepare aspiring leaders to become effective principals. The evolution of the principal role caused a shift from manager to instructional leader. This need means that school districts require a principal pipeline of instructional leaders who are prepared to lead turnaround schools. Even with a focus on instructional leadership within most school districts, many principal preparation programs are failing to provide learning experiences that focus on a leader’s ability to impact student outcomes. Many studies are beginning to evaluate principal preparation programs. The evaluations are causing a shift in the curriculum of university-based and alternative principal preparation programs. Programs are starting to include critical components that focus on hands-on/field experiences, use of data, and practices for monitoring quality instruction. Principal preparation programs must be aligned to the needs of school districts. The literature was an essential element to my study, which helped me gain an understanding of the connection between principal preparation and the development of robust principal pipelines that impact student outcomes.

“Perceived shortfalls in extant PPPs have prompted some districts and cities to construct their own principal “readiness” programs to supplement PPP coursework, adding hands-on experience, mentoring, and training in district-specific information and initiatives” (Dodson, 2015, p. 2). The research is missing strategies for how we prepare and support campus administrators who are already licensed. There needs to be a component of the literature that provides a framework for how to develop a promising pipeline of aspiring leaders who are well-equipped to become instructional leaders that successfully lead campuses. Accordingly, Mendels (2012) the critical idea behind obtaining effective principal pipelines requires four essential elements: principal standards, high-quality training, selective hiring, and a combination of solid on-the-job support and performance evaluation for new hires. Gaps in the literature around principal preparation show that there is a need to determine what high-quality training and field experience is needed to create a robust principal pipeline. The creation of a principal pipeline that meets the needs of the school district would equip new principals with the ability to “hit the ground running” and have a positive impact on student outcomes. Researching this topic provided the opportunity to determine the everyday needs of new principals and their experience on the job that the principal preparation program did not offer as an extension of the principal pipeline training.

## **Research Design and Methodology**

For this qualitative research study, the Case Study method was utilized to determine the learning experiences of graduates of the Urban Principal Preparation Academy (UPPA) who are sitting principals within their first academic year after completion of the program. Case study research involves the study of a case (or cases) within a real-life, contemporary context or setting (Yin, 2014 as cited by Creswell & Poth, 2017). The Case Study method provided an opportunity to develop an in-depth understanding of the case. The sample size consisted of 6 participants who will share their perceptions of what experiences in the UPPA led to building their capacity to impact student outcomes.

Through an interview instrument of about twelve open-ended questions, the study sought to explain how the program increases the capacity of first-year principals to effectively lead their campuses and positively impact student outcomes. Data was collected through the interview process and then transcribed for coding. Codes were determined based on the prevailing trends gathered from the interview process. Once the interviews were transcribed and coded, a peer debrief was conducted to ensure the validity of the data collection and analysis.

The Case Study method provided insight on the experiences learned on the job not a result of experiences from the UPPA Program. Utilizing open-ended questions allowed for exploration of the program's critical characteristics that led to success and gaps in the curriculum based on "on-the-job" learning and experiences. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the plan for this research study was to identify principals based on data from a summative measure such as the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR). The STAAR is the testing program based on the state's curriculum standards, which are known as TEKS (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills). Assessments of these standards are administered to students in grades 3-8 and End-of-the-

Course exams for high school students. Students are assessed in the core subjects of reading, writing, mathematics, science, and social studies. The STAAR is administered at each campus and is designed to measure grade-level standards and determine whether students are making progress from year to year. Each child taking STAAR receives a report that is shared with parents to describe students' performance levels in the core subjects. Campuses receive reports that analyze the overall performance based on criteria for each student under the bands of did not meet grade level, approaching grade level, meeting grade level, or mastering grade-level standards. A campus rating of A-F is designated based on data from STAAR and minimum standards set by the Texas Education Agency. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, the plan was to identify top-performing first-year principals based on STAAR reports provided by the state and district. If STAAR were administered, first-year principals achieving an accountability rating of an “A” or “B” (top two state ratings) would have been identified to participate in the study for their impact on student outcomes. Campuses with an “A” or “B” rating are classified as high performing campuses based on student achievement data from the administration of STAAR.

The STAAR was canceled as a result of school closures to stop the spread of the Coronavirus, ensuring students' and staffs' safety across school districts. The assessments are usually administered annually in April and May. During the spring of 2020, school districts across the state moved to Distance Learning from mid-March to the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year. Consequently, using STAAR results to determine if the UPPA program's principals have impacted student outcomes is not an option for the study.

Principals were identified for the study based on data from district-wide formative assessments such as six weeks common assessments that align with the TEKS. The specific assessments utilized were common assessments administered at the end of the fourth six weeks.

The fourth six weeks district-wide common assessment was a Mock STAAR conducted during the week of February 16-20, 2020. The Mock STAAR was the official STAAR administered in the spring of 2019 by the state and used to determine ratings for the A-F Accountability System. The STAAR is released by the state each year, allowing school districts to measure students' performance before the administration of STAAR. Each campus was administered the district-wide common assessments following TEA guidelines. For testing security and validity of assessment data, testing plans for the Mock STAAR included teachers not testing their assigned students, grade level, or content. Testing accommodations for SPED, Dyslexia, 504, and Limited English Proficient Students, are included in Mock STAAR testing plans as well as adherence to time allotments each day. Once all data was scanned, the district uploaded the data into each campus tracker using raw scores and the scale scoring tools from TEA to mimic the A-F Accountability System. Each campus received an A-F rating in each domain that displayed strengths and opportunities related to achievement and predictability of campus ratings. The data was also ranked by domain 1, which is student achievement. This study provided a chance to make connections between the learning experiences of UPPA program graduates and their ability to impact student outcomes within their first year as principals positively.

### **Site and Participation Selection**

Sitting principals who are graduates of the UPPA were selected to participate in the study. The sample size involved 6 campus principals. The criteria utilized to select participants was student outcomes from the district-wide Mock STAAR administered as a common assessment. Based on examination of the data, principals who obtained ratings of A or B in domain 1 (student achievement) or in domain 2B (student progress) were asked to participate in the study. Both domain 1 and domain 2B weigh heavily in state accountability to determine an overall campus

rating. Based on data from the first cohort of the UPPA Program, about 40 aspiring leaders graduated from the program with about 93% of the aspiring leaders being placed as novice principals. Considerations were taken for ethnicity and gender of principals to gain all perspectives and explanations that informed the case study to ensure diversity was evident in the sample size of the 6 participants. All participants were novice principals who are now within their second year of the principalship. The overall educational experience served as a factor with some principals having a small amount of experience and some having several years of experience prior to becoming a principal. The study sought to gain multiple perspectives from principals. Interviewing these individuals helped to obtain views that are not just limited to one culture, ethnicity, or gender.

Participants were contacted via email to engage in the study. Additional emails were sent to thank participants. Executive directors and deputy chiefs who supervised principals were made aware that a study was taking place and that their principals may be contacted by me to be respectful of their leadership and ensure they were aware of what was taking place. As a follow-up, selected participants were scheduled to engage in the case study interview. Interviews were virtual and took place via Zoom through an interview of about 12 open-ended questions. One and a half hours were reserved to conduct each interview.

My connection to this case study was serving as a former principal for six years within the same school district. As an executive director, I supervise principals. I have recommended two principals from the UPPA program to serve as a principal within the feeder pattern I manage for the 2019-2020 school year. However, these principals were not selected as participants for the case study. All participants chosen to serve in the case study were not directly supervised by me to ensure that I received open and honest answers during the interview process. As a result of my supervisory role to other principals, I ensured that I discussed my role as a researcher who will not



use my position to impact their advancement in the district based on their responses. I reiterated that the interview process's responses to questions were confidential and coded under unidentifiable aliases to ensure they didn't feel pressure to respond a certain way out of fear of retaliation. I emphasized my role as a learner to understand how their experience in the UPPA program made an impact on their success. The individual names and responses were not be shared with the district nor the School Leadership department, where their supervisors serve as colleagues.

Ethical considerations for this qualitative research study involved ensuring that the selected participants remain anonymous. Participants were assigned names during the interview process and coding to protect their identity. Once the research study was conducted, only the anonymously assigned names appeared in the findings.

Possible bias from my role in the research connects directly to the Axiological approach as a Philosophical Assumption. As a former principal, my beliefs about principal preparation were impacted by my experiences of being an instructional leader, creating a positive culture, and strategies to react to student achievement data by providing instructional intervention. While conducting the case study, I ensured that I did not ask leading questions nor insert my experiences or biases to obtain accurate and honest data for this qualitative research study.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

The location utilized to conduct interviews for the case study was a Zoom interview. Principals are busy and often bombarded with issues that would not allow them to leave school. Time was reserved for after school sessions within my schedule to conduct interviews in cases of emergencies or circumstances on campuses that need the attention of the principal would allow me to wait for principals if necessary, to not lose a study participant. Consideration was taken into account to make the experience easy for principals by not asking them to travel off-campus and by

scheduling the best time to meet to conduct the interview. Calendly was used to allow principals to select the time allotment that worked best for their schedule. Once principals selected their preferred time, the Calendly placed the event along with the Zoom link to the interview on their calendars.

Interviews took about 60 to 90-minutes to provide time for the introduction process as well as ample time for the participants to answer 12 open-ended questions. Participants received the interview questions via email 2-3 days before the scheduled interview for review. First, the introduction provided a context for the interview as well as the process. Within the introduction, it was stated that the interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed. Information was shared about anonymity and learning from the principal to gain clear and concise answers to each question. Second, questions were asked related to their learning experiences in the UPPA program using the interview protocol. The interview instrument created to conduct the case study interviews directly correlates to the Lancy (1993) approach to focus on qualitative inquiry within the field of education to gain perspectives from practitioners. Third, participants were asked if there is an additional thought or clarification, they would like to share to conclude the interview. Last, the file was saved on a password-protected computer and an alias assigned to the participant. All data was password protected within an electronic program file to store all transcripts transcribed by REV and documents related to the study. The program was be utilized on my home desktop computer which is password protected. At the conclusion of each session on the computer, the program was logged off to ensure that even if the computer was stolen, the files would not be accessible.

## **Analysis and Validity**

The interview protocol was sent to participants 2-3 days before the scheduled interview took place. While engaging in the interview process, the data was audio-recorded via Zoom and transcribed using the REV software program. Once the interview was transcribed, it was analyzed and sorted into codes to determine trends and findings for the research study. The theoretical framework that will guide the study was taken from common features of successful principal preparation programs as outlined in the literature review. Themes that will be used for this process to gain an understanding of the perceptions of participants in the UPPA program include Field Experience, Project-based learning, and On-the-Job Support, and strategies that impacted student outcomes.

### **Field Experience/Residency**

Field Experience is synonymous with the internship, apprenticeship, or residency of aspiring leaders while in a PPP whether a university-based program or alternative principal pipeline. Corcoran et al. (2012) describes residency in the New York City Aspiring Principals Program as aspiring leaders serving as an apprentice to a practicing mentor principal while receiving training during their tenure in the PPP. PPPs assign aspiring leaders Field Experience anywhere from a semester to a full year of learning, leading, and engaging in experiences of principals. In the study on PPPs conducted by Dodson (2015), principals believed that field experiences helped prepare them to lead schools.

### **Project-Based Learning**

Project-Based Learning for aspiring leaders provides a hands-on approach to learning as a type of training to engage in while participating in a PPP. Gill 2012 concluded that effective PPPs prepare aspiring leaders by teaching them how to coach teachers, plan professional development, and analyze data to determine student needs. Lochmiller et al. (2017) states, “Adult learning theory rests on the assumption that individuals learn when engaged in meaningful activities that replicate

the challenges of the work.” Project-Based Learning may also consist of assessing or evaluating the hands-on experiences that aspiring leaders are assigned to complete. Mendels (2012) concludes that evaluation and support go hand and hand because it allows leaders guidance and the ability to overcome obstacles.

### **On-the-Job Support**

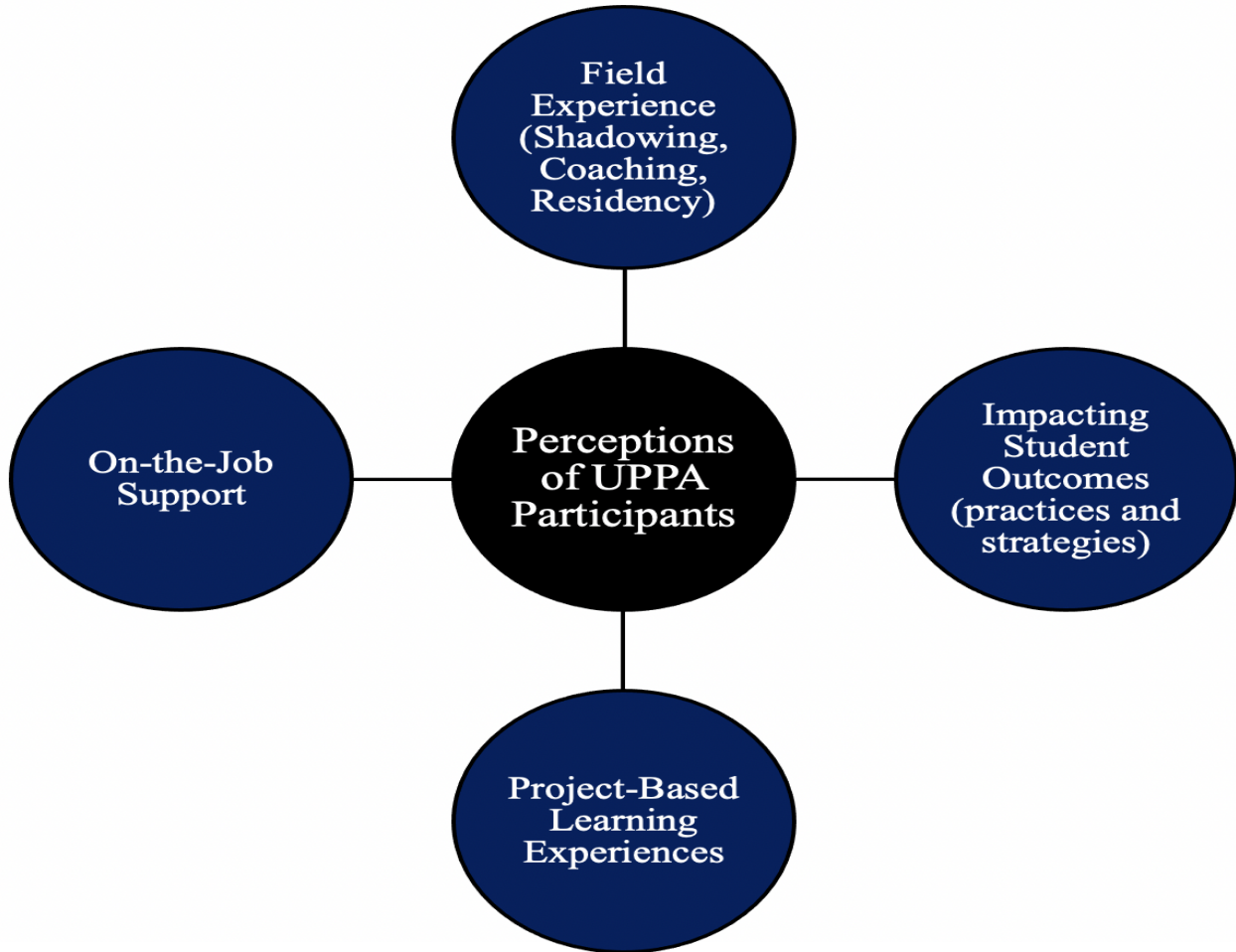
Ensuring that first-year principals are properly supported after completion of training from PPPs is essential to their success. On-the-job support can be defined as additional on-the-job training and mentoring from an experienced educator not serving in a supervisory role. Gray et al. (2007) concludes, “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.” Similarly Woosey (2010) believes that PPPs serve as the foundation for aspiring principals, but further leadership development and mentoring is needed for principals to become effective leaders.

### **Impacting Student Outcomes**

Through high stakes testing and state accountability, school success is often measured by student outcomes. Instructional Leadership is essential to school success and school improvement. According to Day et al. (2016), monitoring and supporting teachers to provide high-quality learning opportunities are strategies necessary for building an effective instructional program that reaches every classroom. Equally as important, Dodson (2015) believes that learning curriculum, data analysis, and teacher observations/evaluations play a role in instructional leadership and the impact on student outcomes.

Table 4: Theoretical Framework

### Theoretical Framework



The coding process involved reading the transcripts to determine themes based on the theoretical framework and relationships that emerged from the interviews. Transcripts from the REV software program were used in the NVivo12 Software program to help with coding assigned to themes. Files were created and organized for each interview and saved as the alias of the case study participant. Once themes were established, codes were assigned to themes. Themes within the transcript were copied and pasted into their assigned code. Once themes were analyzed, trends and findings were identified. The specific method used for coding refers to figure 8.2 in (Creswell & Poth, 2017) called Procedures for Theme Fostering Relationships.

The triangulation method will be used to ensure the validity of the qualitative data collection. The triangulation method aligns most to Lather's 1991 method to reconceptualize data to define it as trustworthy during face-to-face analysis of the data. The transcripts were utilized for information checks with participants. The triangulation method ensured that there was congruence between the coding and analysis of the data. The results were verified before they were presented as the final research.

### **Sample Size and Selection**

This study sought to understand the impact of principals' preparation from the UPPA program on student outcomes consisted of a small sample size of 6 principals. About 40 aspiring principals completed the UPPA program. About 32 leaders were selected to become principals upon completion of the program. Of the 32 leaders, about 8 participants were invited to participate in the study because the student achievement data from the Mock STAAR assessment showed the campus obtain an A or B in domain 1 or domain 2B. This excluded interviews with principals who received ratings in the two domains of a C-F letter grade. After reviewing the data, none of the first-year middle or high school principals were included in the study because the data showed a

C-F letter grade in the two identified domains for student achievement and student progress. Only six elementary principals responded to participate in the study to provide their perceptions of successes and gaps. Six participants were a small percentage of the graduates of the UPPA program. Data and trends could have been collected from first-year principals who have struggled academically due to taking on high needs schools, involving turnaround work where the data may not have reached a rating of A or B within their first academic year.

With the study being limited to only elementary principals, the perspective of secondary principals' learning experiences from the UPPA program were not included. There was not an opportunity to determine if there were differences or trends in instructional systems that impacted student outcomes at both levels. Principals reflected upon their perceived gaps in learning based on unexpected challenges in the principal role. Only interviewing elementary principals was a missed opportunity to collect trend data across levels and determine if there are different challenges when transitioning to the elementary, middle, or high school levels.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

As previously stated, the original plan to qualify participants for an invitation to engage in the study had an A or B in student achievement based on the STAAR (State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness). The STAAR is annually administered as a summative measure at the close of the school year. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, school districts across the state were closed indefinitely, and the assessments were waived. Schools quickly transitioned to online learning. The last official data set was administering the Mock STAAR assessment during the fourth six weeks grading period at the end of February 2020.

If schools had continued normally, without the Covid-19 pandemic happening, about eight to ten more weeks of instruction would have taken place before the final administration of the STAAR in May and June. Suppose campuses were provided this additional time for teaching skills

to mastery, intervening on insufficient data, and implementing highly effective instructional systems. In that case, there is a possibility that more principals would have qualified to participate in the study. As a formative assessment, the Mock STAAR being administered during the fourth six-weeks grading period usually allows leaders to analyze data, obtain support, and create a plan to improve the data. With this amount of time and without a pandemic, there is a possibility that the study would have involved a selection of principals at all levels and a larger sample size of perspectives to synthesize.



## **Synthesis of Evidence**

Due to the Covid-19 Pandemic, the qualitative case study interviews took place via Zoom for about one hour. The interviews took place after the instructional day to decrease possible interruptions that could occur when interviews are scheduled during the school day. All participants were currently serving within their second year as principals, completing at least one full year as a campus principal. Six participants who graduated from the UPPA and who successfully impacted student outcomes within their first year were chosen to engage in the one-on-one interview.

### **Program Context**

To become participants in the UPPA program, aspiring principals were required to successfully complete each phase of the application process to become part of the first cohort and begin training. Each participant started with completing the application that included their resume, background, and essay questions—successful completion of the application afforded participants an invitation to the assessment center.

Executive Directors and principals served as assessors and received training on rubrics and scoring before starting the assessment center. Rubrics were used to norm the scoring process for each of the four components of the assessment center. During the assessments, candidates participated in a role-play of feedback based on a video observation. Next, they analyzed data and provided the next steps for a campus. Then, participants completed a fishbowl activity to evaluate leadership and collaboration based on a budget to develop teachers and purchase technology. Finally, the assessment center closed with a question and answer interview. Once all scores were submitted, candidates who ranked proficient and above and recommended to move into the program received invitations to begin engaging in the after-school training and field assessments.

The district partnered with two consultants to provide quality training and projects for participants. The partnerships included Teaching Trust and Big Rock Educational Services.

Participants who completed the program were ranked, and their applications were used as the pipeline/pool for the Principal Selection Process. Executive Directors were encouraged to choose the pool of UPPA graduates to interview to fill principal vacancies. Each of the case study participants completed the UPPA program.

Projects assigned to UPPA participants were part of their learning experiences and field-based assessments. The assessments took place throughout the school year after UPPA participants received training and time to plan to implement their projects. The field-based evaluations were conducted by executive directors and a team of principals. Executive Directors recruited high-performing principals in their feeder pattern and the campus principal, who supervised the aspiring leader to serve as the assessment team members. Before field-based assessments, executive directors received training from the UPPA department on rubrics, scoring, and exemplars. The assessment team met at the aspiring leader's campus to conduct the assessments based on evidence of their assigned projects in classrooms and clear expectations based on their vision. At the campus session's close, the assessment team would determine their strengths and weaknesses based on the rubric. Finally, the executive director would meet with the aspiring leader to provide feedback based on the assessment.

Each interview started with their journey to the principalship and the campus's condition before starting their tenure as principal. The interview's focus was to determine how experiences from the UPPA program helped them impact student outcomes. The fourth common assessment of the school year was utilized as a measure of success. Originally, STAAR (State Assessments of Academic Readiness) was going to be used to measure success for impacting student outcomes. However, due to the pandemic administration of STAAR was waived when school districts shifted

to virtual learning. Participants were asked which activities and training were most significant to their success within their first year. They were also asked about experiences as a first-year principal that may have been challenging or learned on the job in place of the UPPA program's training.

Table 5 shows a complete list of experience, years as an assistant principal, overall years of experience, and the number of years served in the school district. Although the participants had completed their first year as principal, the overall years of experience range from 10 years of experience to 31 years of experience. Their years of experience as an assistant principal ranged from 2 to 6 years. All of the participants were elementary principals due to the qualification of positive student outcomes. Of the six interview participants, two were male, four were female, two were African American, three were Hispanic, and one White. As an Urban School district, it is crucial to show each campus's socioeconomic status (SES). The SES ranged from 63.1% to 94.6% of students enrolled qualifying for free or reduced lunch. The participants serve campuses within a variety of areas within the city. Each participant had at least two years of experience outside of the district during their year as teachers or assistant principals.

**Table 5: Interview Participants**

Alias	Level	Ethnicity/Gender	Years Overall	Years in District	Years as Assistant Principal	SES Status
Principal Chavez	Elementary	Hispanic Male	12	10	2	63.1%
Principal Ramirez	Elementary	Hispanic Female	15	14	4	85.5%
Principal Brown	Elementary	African American Male	10	6	3	77.9%

Principal Urbina	Elementary	Hispanic Female	18	16	6	96.2%
Principal Richardson	Elementary	White Female	10	8	3	95.1%
Principal Sims	Elementary	African American Female	31	20	4	94.6%

**The Interviews**

Upon reflection of the interview and an analysis of the interview transcripts, I believe that the principals wanted to share their first-year principal experiences. They also wanted to share how the UPPA program contributed to their success. Participants were transparent about which learning experiences and training activities contributed to their success and the challenges they faced during their first year as principals. It was very evident that each principal would strongly recommend the program. They also shared upgrades for learning opportunities to impact future cohorts of leaders stepping into the principal role.

Although each principal's story was unique, many similarities emerged across participants. The standard best practices and key features in a high-quality principal preparation program provided a theoretical framework for conducting one-on-one interviews. This lens allowed me to make connections to the best practices implemented in the UPPA program. There were common themes with high congruences, such as data analysis and action planning, coaching and feedback, as well as Professional Learning Communities (PLC) protocols named as best practices that contributed to their success. Each of the candidates was inspired by educators who saw their potential and leadership in their future. There were areas during the study that lacked alignment related to the challenges they faced and what learning experience was needed from LEAD to

mitigate that challenge. Each response, whether congruent or not, was authentic and told the story that needs to be shared.

## **Principal Participant Narratives**

### Principal Chavez

Principal Chavez's journey to the principalship was nontraditional. He was initially a sales representative for a company before joining an alternative certification program to become a teacher. Principal Chavez has twelve whole years of experience with two years of campus leadership experience as an assistant principal at the secondary level before taking on the principal role.

The elementary campus he served had about 63% of its student population identified for free or reduced lunch. The campus served approximately 463 students. The historical achievement data of this campus was average. The campus had a state and local accountability rating of a C.

Principal Chavez felt his role in impacting student outcomes was to redirect all actions and decisions to students and their outcomes. He frequently directed the focus on the campus vision and goals. He used his data analysis and action planning knowledge to move away from reviewing achievement data periodically to implementing it as a best practice. Principal Chavez knew his staff didn't lack the will to be successful, which led him to increase understanding of pedagogy, make data analysis a routine, and celebrate the team for growth in data and pedagogical practices.

### Principal Ramirez

Principal Ramirez had 15 years of experience overall with four years of campus experience as an assistant principal before becoming a principal. She also served as a campus instructional coach, which is a position that works directly with assistant principals and principals to coach teachers. Before public school education, she had 20 years of experience at the university level.

The elementary campus she served had approximately 400 students, with 85% of the students identified for free or reduced lunch. The campus is currently rated as a B. Principal Ramirez describes the campus as having “pockets of mastery and areas of opportunity.” The campus had substantial achievement in mathematics and areas to focus on across grade levels in reading. Principal Ramirez was very forward about not being satisfied with the status quo to move the campus to the next level. She states, "Because, one of the things that happen when you go to a campus that is considered ‘good,’ is that everybody's comfortable with what you're doing."

Principal Ramirez described her role in impacting student outcomes to create a collaborative culture and build others' capacity. She worked with the staff to understand that change has to happen if the campus moves from good to great. Most of her work was centered around sense-making on achievement data and culture and climate.

#### Principal Brown

Principal Brown had ten overall years of experience, with three of those years served as an assistant principal. He also served as an instructional coach for one year. Principal Brown started his educational career through the Teach for America program. He was also encouraged by several leaders within the district to apply for the UPPA program as an avenue to become a principal.

The elementary campus Principal Brown served has almost 600 students, with about 78% of the students qualifying for free or reduced lunch. According to state and local accountability, his campus has a B rating. Principal Brown describes the campus as having a solid foundation for achievement. Still, from stakeholder interviews when taking the position, the data showed a need to improve the student and staff culture and robust systems for tracking student achievement data. The previous campus systems needed structure. Principal Brown spoke to the importance of creating systems to focus on data-driven instructions and PLCs.

Principal Brown stated that he believes he impacts student outcomes by empowering others through distributed leadership. His goal was to model for his instructional coaches and assistant principal through a gradual release model where after leading and working closely with the instructional coaches and assistant principal, they would begin to independently lead instructional and cultural systems. Principal Brown expected teachers and students to know the data down to the student level and celebrate when students and staff reached goals.

### Principal Urbina

Principal Urbina's total years of experience was eighteen, with six years as an assistant principal at both the elementary and secondary level before becoming a principal. She taught for ten years before becoming an assistant principal.

The campus Principal Urbina led has about 400 elementary kids, with approximately 96% of students qualifying for free or reduced lunch. According to state and local accountability, the campus rating is a high B. Before Principal Urbina's arrival, she describes the campus as doing well academically but losing all of their distinctions designated by the Texas Education Agency through state accountability.

When asked about her role in improving student outcomes, Principal Urbina stated, "So I think one of my foremost jobs is to make sure that I'm an instructional leader and I have to know what good instruction looks like. I have to coach my A-team to get us to where we want to be. And I have to try to create that vision. That's very important for our whole campus". She took advice from the previous principal to continue the focus on earned autonomy. Principal Urbina feels her main work is to drive the vision by ensuring that instruction and academic achievement are always at the forefront.

### Principal Richardson

Principal Richardson started her teaching career in another state before making Texas her home. She had ten total years of experience with three years of experience and an assistant principal and experience as an instructional coach. Her influence comes from a leader within the district who inspired her to seek leadership roles beyond the classroom.

Principal Richardson led a B rated elementary school with over 600 students. 95% of the total student population qualifies for free or reduced lunch. She described the campus as reaching a B rating in Domain 2A of state accountability that measures student progress. Even though the overall campus rating is a B, the student achievement (Domain 1) and closing the gaps (Domain 3) were rated as Cs.

Principal Richardson defined her role in impacting student outcomes as being an instructional leader. Her focus was on making sure the campus engages in Professional Learning Communities, professional development, and observation/feedback of teachers. She expressed an understanding that operations is a component of the principalship but also a belief instruction has to be the priority. Principal Richardson wanted to have involvement in all instructional systems and keep a pulse on teaching daily.

### Principal Sims

Principal Sims is a 31-year veteran with four years of service as an assistant principal and one and a half years as an instructional coach. She had over 20 full years of teaching experience at the elementary and middle school levels. She was an assistant principal on the campus she currently leads.

Principal Sims arrived at the campus as an assistant principal after their second year of not meeting the state accountability standards, receiving a rating of "Improvement Required" two years in a row. She worked side-by-side with the principals to improve the overall rating. The latest accountability rating for the campus is a B. Principal Sims reflected, "And so that took a lot



of extra hours, a lot of planning, a lot of building teacher capacity, but we were able to put our heads together and get it done."

Principal Sims stated that when transitioning from being an assistant principal to the principal on the same campus, she had to upgrade some practices and systems that were lacking to impact student outcomes. She felt that teachers were teaching, but students weren't learning. The lack of learning made her analyze instructional delivery and restructure the lesson cycle to maximize instruction and provide opportunities for every learner.

## Key Findings

Principal participants were asked how the UPPA program contributed to their ability to lead their campus within their first year successfully. They were asked to describe training, and field experiences they felt were the most significant for their growth and best practices to refine their work. The goal of the conversation was to understand which learning experiences helped them improve student outcomes. Principals were also asked to reflect upon which practices they continued to use after obtaining the principalship. Three themes emerged from the case study interviews as specific learning that contributed to improving student outcomes.

*Theme 1: Data Analysis*

- *Track data to determine strengths and weaknesses that led to instructional decisions.*
- *Development of leader data action plans and requiring teacher data action plans after common assessments to create strategies and short term goals to improve student achievement data.*

*Theme 2: Engaging teachers in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) through refined protocols.*

*Theme 3: Implementation of Observation and Feedback sessions with teachers using refined protocols.*

<b>Table 6: Themes of Significant Learning Experiences by Participant</b>			
	Data Analysis	Professional Learning Communities	Observation and Feedback
Principal Chavez	✓	✓	
Principal Ramirez	✓	✓	✓

Principal Brown	✓	✓	✓
Principal Urbina	✓	✓	✓
Principal Richardson	✓	✓	✓
Principal Sims	✓		✓

<b>Table 7: Overall Trend Data by Theme</b>		
Theme 1: Data analysis	6/6	100%
Theme 2: Engagement in PLCs	5/6	83%
Theme 3: Implementation of Observation and Feedback	5/6	83%

**Learning Experiences and Training**

**Data Analysis and Tracking**

The theme of a best practice that was consistent across all participants was data analysis and tracking. All participants felt they had a better understanding of how to review data to determine strengths, weaknesses, and campus action steps contributed to their success as a first-year principal. Principal Urbina remarked “The UPPA program, they also trained us on using the data action plans and being able to differentiate between your students who scored at approaches, meets, masters, and did not meet levels. We created those plans and used those plans with teachers to develop action steps.” Participants had the opportunity to examine various data sets to develop a broader understanding of the principalship. They were able to create a timeline and system for monitoring data and action steps.

Campus goals were connected to visioning. Understanding data from the campus, teacher, and student level called for the creation of a vision. Participants determined how data would be displayed in PLC rooms and classrooms. They learned how students play a role in monitoring their growth goals and tracking their achievement data. They learned to connect culture with data to celebrate small wins throughout the school year through well-planned celebrations. Principal Sims reflections, “Because I could have a narrow focus, just push, push, push toward instruction, but it's also important to celebrate the victories along the way. And that speaks to making sure that you don't kill your climate and culture just honing in on one thing, but just letting people know along the way how much they are appreciated and celebrating the victories along the way.”

Tracking data was a skill set afforded to the UPPA participants. Aspiring leaders learned how to create a system for monitoring data daily, weekly, and at the end of six-weeks grading periods. They were able to align the tracking of data to campus goals to determine an area of focus for support, coaching, and resources. Trackers can be developed in Google or Excel programs to calculate and color-coded based on strengths, weaknesses, and goals. Tracking data calls for a system for administering assessments, downloading data, and intervening. Below, Principal Brown spoke about the impact of data analysis, “The data analysis piece was really strong in UPPA. I definitely think the data-driven instruction piece was one of the most impactful in the UPPA program.”

### **Developing Data Action Plans**

The data action plans were created after administering common assessments at the close of the six weeks grading period. The purpose of the action plans was to improve data by the next administration of common assessments through data analysis and action steps to improve student outcomes before summative assessments. They consisted of two components, the leader action plan and the teacher action plan. Principal Sims stated, “Probably the most important training for

me was the data analysis component, developing the teacher action plan and the leader action plan, specifically on the teacher action plan, those out of place students.”

The leadership action plan aligned with the content area led by aspiring leaders in the UPPA program. At the time, the aspiring leaders were campus assistant principals. For example, if the aspiring leader evaluated the campus's math department, all of the department's teacher-level data was utilized to create the plan. The action plan included campus goals for student achievement and the student progress measure. Leaders determined the difference between the current student outcome data from the common assessment to the summative assessment goals that defined STAAR's overall accountability rating. In addition to data, the action plan focused on individualized teacher support such as coaching, rehearsing of lessons, and classroom resources. It also included a timeline of celebrations based on the six-week goals. Principal Ramirez found the development of action plans meaningful for the work she does today. She explained, “That common assessment action plan instrument that we use, I still use them. For me, it is spectacular. It’s because it’s clear, it guides you step by step”. In the same manner, Principal Brown described, “The action plan is a common practice I use after every major assessment. It is just like figuring out where did we go wrong? What did we do right? How can we adjust?”

Similarly, the teacher action plan focused on campus goals and the impact at the classroom level. Teachers analyzed data with aspiring leaders to set six-week goals and understand their impact on the campus's overall accountability rating. Rosters of their classroom data were included in the plan to show their comprehensive student achievement data and the percentage of students meeting their progress goals set by the state. Teacher action steps created to improve the data included reteaching standards with low mastery, small group intervention, after-school tutoring, etc. Principal Urbina stated that the data action plans were a practical exercise that she continues

to use today. Below, she reflects on her experience with data action plans: “We still use the plans every six weeks. My executive director would say, you had action steps with your teachers, so now let's go see proof of it. So we had to go back into the classroom and we took a look at their small group tables and we took a look at whatever action steps we had to come up with.”

### **Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)**

The foundation of PLCs within the district comes from creating the four Power Meetings: Administrative Team Meetings, Content Meetings, Look Forward PLC (planning good instruction), and the Look Back PLC (data meeting.) The Content Meeting was developed to provide time for content leaders such as instructional coaches, assistant principals, and principals to plan the PLC for their department. During this meeting, they created exemplars and scripts to have tools that will help with coaching and planning with teachers during their Look Forward or Look Backward PLC. During the Administrative Team Meeting, the principal discusses instructional and operational agenda items for the week. It is also an opportunity for principals to provide content leaders with feedback on their PLC preparation. Principal Chavez cited, “practicing our PLC and our power meetings with other principals” as “the most valuable experience” of his pre-service training. In addition, Principal Brown continues to use the practice on his campus. “So that’s been a common practice I’ve been using and now teachers are like, when do you want to role play? Or even if it’s a data meeting or looking forward, or looking back, my admin team will practice ahead of time.”

The Look Forward and Look Back PLCs are specific protocols to focus on looking ahead to lessons for the upcoming week or looking back at data from common assessments to plan for a reteach of the highest leverage standards. Within both PLCs, leaders must know the high leverage standards that will be addressed and unpack those standards with the teacher for a deeper dive into the content of what students are expected to know and show. Teachers then create a script of the

lesson they will introduce or reteach. Then, teachers role-play the introduction or reteach of the lesson/standard for a perfect practice before standing in front of students to deliver. Finally, leaders provide teachers with feedback on their role-play of the lesson and schedule time to observe the delivery. The district shifted towards this particular protocol to improve first quality instruction and mastery of standards. Principal Ramirez indicates, “I truly believe in the Look Forward and Look Back meetings. For me, those are two essential collaboration opportunities with teachers. It supports teachers new to their content and diving deeper into data.”

### **Observation and Feedback**

UPPA participants participated in training sessions on observation and feedback and a field-based assessment where they debriefed classrooms with a campus instructional coach and provided feedback to a teacher observed with the assessment team. A rubric was utilized to determine if participants followed the protocol and chose the highest leverage feedback based on the Observation and Feedback Waterfall. Principal Ramirez spoke to the benefits of the training and field experiences related to observation and feedback: “One of the areas that the UPPA helped me a lot was observation and feedback. Because for me, it’s essential that an instructional leader is able to identify what are those gaps that exist between the teaching and what is being taught.”

"See It! Name It! Do It!" The protocol was adopted from Paul Bambrick to train aspiring leaders on observation and feedback. The protocol focused on seeing the success based on upgrades from previous observations, naming the bite-sized action steps for teachers, and doing it by rehearsing the action step for an upgrade during the next class period or the next lesson. The Observation and Feedback Waterfall provided a list of action steps based on a progression with the purpose of leaders speaking/using the same language with the teacher and understanding where to start coaching a teacher based on the progression. Leaders focused on 10-15 minute teacher observations, scripting their feedback, and creating a weekly schedule that allowed them to focus

on teacher growth in classrooms. Principal Richardson describes observation and feedback as meaningful learning from UPPA. She shared that “There could be gaps in observation and feedback for those who didn’t go through the Urban Principal Preparation Academy. Through UPPA we really looked at the See It, Name It, Do It protocol, as a way to give feedback. We also have been given the resource of the waterfall. This helped us prepare for coaching.”

Principal Urbina continued to use the observation and feedback process she learned from UPPA. She still found the tools and protocol beneficial for coaching her admin team. She offers, “One of the things they had us do is role-play. So, me giving feedback to a teacher. And that’s something that we still use today. It’s something that last week I coached my Admin team on.”

## **Perceptions of Gaps**

### **Unexpected Challenges**

During the interviews, participants were asked to describe some unexpected challenges they faced during their first year as principal. They were asked to reflect upon how the UPPA program prepared or did not prepare them to take on those challenges. The goal of this conversation was to understand their learning from "on the job" experiences or things they may not have learned in the UPPA program training and field-based assessments.

Participants described their unexpected challenges and made recommendations for training they wish they had engaged in during the lead program. They felt strongly in their ability to be instructional leaders based on their learning experiences in the UPPA program. However, they mentioned a few "on the job" components they wish they had learned through their tenure in the LEAD program. Three themes emerged from the interview.

*Theme 1: Lack of knowledge of operational systems such as budget, transportation, maintenance, etc.*



*Theme 2: Soft skills that connect to change management and culture.*

*Theme 3: Transitioning from the role as assistant principal into the principalship.*

<b>Table 8: Theme of Unexpected Challenges</b>			
	Operational	Soft Skills	Transitioning
Principal Chavez		✓	✓
Principal Ramirez	✓		
Principal Brown	✓		
Principal Urbina	✓	✓	
Principal Richardson	✓	✓	✓
Principal Sims		✓	✓

<b>Table 9: Overall Trend Data by Theme</b>		
Theme 1: Operational	4/6	67%
Theme 2: Soft Skills	4/6	67%
Theme 3: Transitioning	3/6	50%

### **Operational Systems**

Beyond instructional leadership, it is essential for principals to have a working knowledge of campus operations that include but are not limited to campus budgets, maintenance,

transportation, etc. Principals discussed not knowing who to call to get the service needed for their campuses or not having previous experience with operations in the UPPA program nor as an assistant principal. Principal Ramirez concluded that, “I think the operational component of the school, we're talking about budget, we're talking about Title One, or we're talking about CIP, where we're talking about CNA, all those components are new or you have this experience with the principal before and you were in charge of that. I, in my experience, never had that operations experience with other principals.” Principal Ramirez mentioned the need for knowing who to call. She felt it would have been beneficial to engage in training experiences related to the principalship before her first year in the role.

Principal Brown also named campus operations and an area of learning at the start of his principalship. He felt strength in instructional leadership but lacked an understanding of campus operations that did not involve instruction or culture. Principal Brown cited, “I feel that operations is not talked about enough for first year principals. There was a lot of stuff that I had to just hustle and find out for myself and call my old principals. I feel like operations need to be prioritized a little bit more so that we can hit the ground running.” In addition, Principal Brown felt the lack of preparation during fall leveling because he knew nothing about how the budget impacts campus allocations and job codes.

### **Soft Skills**

Soft skills can be defined as interpersonal skills involved with the ability to work with others, communicate effectively with all stakeholders, as well as the balance between being driven and having empathy for others. Principal Urbina specifically mentioned the need to have soft skills. She felt she was always cautious about what she said to her staff. She offered, “I was being very cognizant of anything I said. Any decision you make is going to have a consequence.” She

understood that decisions and rationale of delivery of any message to staff could have a positive or negative impact.

Principal Chavez spoke about wishing he had known how to obtain buy-in through a strong rationale. He felt that he could have done a better job at building connections with staff. He noted, “The one thing that I was not prepared for and it was one of my biggest lessons learned last year was really getting to the heart of your staff in order to influence behaviors.” In his experience, before becoming a principal, he didn’t have to touch the emotional side of leadership. He monitored systems that he believed were student-centered and should be executed to benefit kids. He had to learn “on the job” that some people need the “why” behind the “what and how” in order to have a clear picture and work towards meeting the campus vision and goals.

### **Transitioning**

Principal Sims’ experience was unique because she transitioned from assistant principal to principal on the same campus. Staff members struggled with the change in roles and responsibilities, knowing her previously as the person who assisted the principal, not the campus leader who makes decisions and responsible for everything and person on the campus. Principal Sims claimed, “As an assistant principal I found that I was always the go-to person when they didn't like what the principal asked them to do. Well, now I'm the person that's giving the directives.” This change caused a strain on some of the relationships previously formed and some struggled with changes she made to focus on student achievement. She felt she needed to obtain buy-in to make the changes necessary to move staff out of their comfort zone to take the campus to the next level.

When Principal Richardson transitioned from assistant principal to principal, she didn’t know any personnel at the campus she was appointed to lead. She felt like a stranger with no allies

on the campus. She wasn't afforded the opportunity to choose the leadership team of assistant principals and instructional coaches who would work directly with her to improve student achievement. Principal Richardson shared, "As you're at a campus longer and your staff knows you well, especially your AP, your CIC, it is easier to start having that unified vision where I can tell my AP, "Hey, can you do this for me?", and she can do it in a way that almost sounds like I did it." Sh

e felt as a first year principal, she was trying to build trust with her administrative team. She had to take a lot of time to sit down with each member and either walk them through plans or provide feedback. She felt that learning how to distribute leadership was challenging for her having to work with a team she never worked with before.

Last, Principal Chavez shared his transition from being a high school assistant principal to leading an elementary campus as principal. Not only did he have to learn a different culture, leading an elementary school calls for a different skill set. Principal Chavez reflected, "If I had done things we did at the high school level as a blanket system, I wouldn't have lasted an hour in this role." During his first year as principal, he had to learn that at the elementary level his staff wanted to know him as a person and have a connection with him. He began using tools such as personality assessments to understand the needs of his staff.

### **Perceived Gaps in Learning Without UPPA**

Participants were asked what they perceived would be gaps in learning for assistant principals who transitioned from the assistant principal position to the principal position without engaging in learning experiences from the Urban Principal Preparation Academy. One common thread that summarized the response was that participants felt that new principals who were not

graduates of the UPPA program would have missed out on learning experiences that focused on implementing and leading instructional systems such as data analysis, observation/feedback, and PLCs. Principal Brown shared, “UPPA is a good program. I did enjoy the content and I thought it was very helpful in refining systems and structures beforehand before going into that first year. That was helpful.”

### **Recommending UPPA**

Participants were asked if they would recommend the UPPA to aspiring principals within the district. They were also asked to state what they felt participants would gain from completing this program they would not gain if moving directly from assistant principal to a principal position. Based on the six participants interviewed, 100% of the participants would recommend the UPPA to aspiring principals. Every principal felt the program helped them gain more skills and confidence to lead campus and are better off in the principalship because of the program. Principal Sims recalled, “I think that it gives you a footing as an assistant principal so that you aren't going in completely blind, because it's a completely different role when you are the AP, and when you are the principal and everything rests in your lap.”

Principal Chavez reflected upon how the learning experiences from UPPA helped prepare them for the principal role. He mentioned that he would recommend UPPA to aspiring leaders and that he has encouraged many to apply for the program this school year. Principal Chavez described the benefits of UPPA: “One thing that I think UPPA has done a really good job of is anticipation, so what's going to happen next year because that's really what we're preparing them for. Peyton Manning said that the biggest difference between college football and the NFL is that in college football, you throw the ball to your receivers and in the NFL you throw your ball where the receiver is going.” He felt the UPPA shows them how to anticipate what will come up in the school year and how to prepare for what is coming.

## **On-the-Job Support**

Even when going through extensive training and preparation to become principals, there are still unexpected challenges. One thing mentioned by study participants was knowing and understanding who to call to meet their needs. Three principals spoke about the need for continued training and non-evaluative coaching. Principal Brown reflected upon his residency in the Teaching Trust program where he was able to have on-site coaching from someone who was not his formal supervisor. He detailed, “I was able to actually have someone come consistently to observe me. I had check-ins really consistently. I know the ED will come and evaluate me on a particular practice, but that’s different than actually checking in with me and saying like “How is it going?” Principal Brown felt he was able to share his concerns and work through problems without being evaluated.

Once UPPA participants complete the program, they can apply to become principals. There are some opportunities for new principal training. Participants mentioned the need for having continued training for new principals that is similarly structure to UPPA. According to Principal Richards, “My feedback would be to really continue to make sure there was the continuity so it doesn’t feel like you do this UPPA program to apply for principal, but then it doesn’t continue once you’re in the role.”

Principal Urbina spoke about the help she received from the UPPA program executive director during new principal meetings. She reached out to the executive director for additional coaching and support. This is an example of non-evaluative coaching because the executive director of UPPA supervises the program but does not supervise principals. Principal Urbina shared that her coach advised her that, “Based on your school, you’re not going to go in there and change everything. You have to go there and you need to be a listener, you need to be a learner.

You need to learn from others and have that guiding coalition.” Principal Urbina felt that advice helped her build relationships on campus after struggling with decisions and building rationales.

### **Summary**

The findings above suggest that UPPA participants felt adequately prepared to lead a campus within their first year to improve student outcomes. Principals felt confident in implementing instructional systems such as observation and feedback, professional learning communities, and analysis and action steps related to improving data. The field-based projects and assessments allowed aspiring leaders to implement and obtain feedback on instructional systems. Their unexpected challenges aligned to gaps in learning that created “on the job” learning experiences pertained to operational systems, soft skills, and transitioning into the principal role. Principals also spoke to the need for continued training within their first year as principals an non-evaluative support and coaching.

## **Strategic Response**

The purpose of this case study was to identify principals' perceptions of best principal preparation practices that impacted their ability to positively impact student outcomes during their first year. When aspiring principals are adequately prepared and trained, they are allowed to attain success when stepping into the role of principal. Accountability systems, standardized testing, and school ratings are based mainly on student achievement. School Success or failure is measured by student achievement. Leaders must have proficient knowledge of instructional systems to improve student achievement from the highest performing to the most struggling schools. The UPPA graduates shared their perceptions of the learning experiences and field-based projects that catered to instructional leadership for the development and implementation of instructional systems. A few themes emerged during this study. Observation and feedback, professional learning communities, data analysis, and data action planning emerged as themes that new principals perceived to have made the most significant impact on their success. Many of the participants felt confident in their ability to lead and monitor the instructional systems at their new campuses upon completing the program.

While principals felt confident about instructional leadership, they spoke about unexpected challenges as first-year principals. A few themes arose from their perceptions of gaps in their preparation. First, principals felt that they didn't have a deep understanding of operational systems on the campus, including but not limited to budgets, maintenance, transportation, campus improvement plans, etc. They shared that they had to find answers by calling veteran principals, mentors, or even executive directors to help them solve campus issues or point them in the right direction for who to call to serve their campuses. Second, some principals felt they lacked the soft



skills needed to create changes or buy-in for new systems and change the status quo. Lacking soft skills was especially hard where campus stakeholders felt they've already arrived at success. Within the work of educators, soft skills greatly influence campus culture and take the school community on a journey to reach goals. Last, some principals felt transitioning from the assistant principal role to the principal role was an unexpected challenge. One study participant transitioned from being a high school assistant principal to an elementary assistant principal. Instructional and cultural systems are different at each level. Many even perceive the personality of elementary and secondary campuses to be quite different. Another participant transitioned within the same school building, making it hard for staff to understand the change in actions from what they knew of the leader in the assistant principal role as a follower versus actually leading the campus. Adding these learning experiences to PPPs could create a robust and well-rounded leader.

### **Recommendations**

Based on principal perceptions from the case study of principals in the Urban Principal Preparation Academy and the Theoretical Framework developed from the literature, I am recommending six strategies. The strategies I am recommending are for University-Based Principal Preparation Programs and Alternative Principal Pipelines to support learning experiences/curriculum while participants engage in PPPs and ongoing support for new principals upon completion of PPPs.

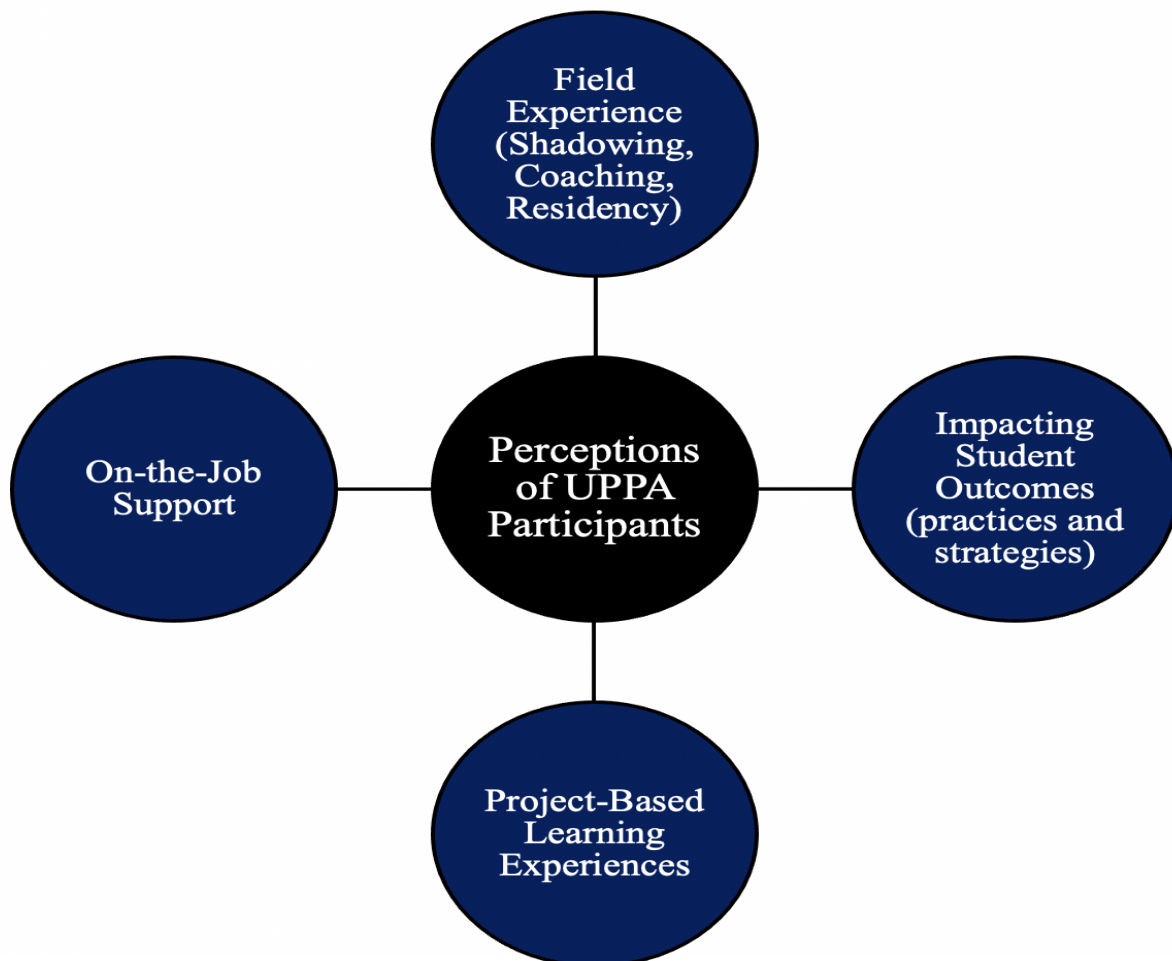
The Theoretical Framework below from Table 4 was created as a lens for the case study based on the key features of highly effective principal preparation programs as shown on page 13 in Table 2: Key Features of University-Based Principal Preparation Programs and on page 17 in Table 3: Key Features of Alternative-Based Principal Preparation Programs. The four main components of the Theoretical Framework are:

- Practices and strategies to impact student outcomes

- Project-based learning experiences
- Field experiences such as shadowing and residency
- On-the-job support while in the principal role

The Theoretical Framework will be coupled with principal perceptions from the case study interviews to provide recommendations for learning experiences and support for PPPs.

### **Theoretical Framework**



Based on the responses captured during the case study interviews, the UPPA program did a great job with practices and strategies to impact student outcomes and project-based learning experiences as displayed in the Theoretical Framework. Participants referred to instructional systems where they received training such as professional learning communities, observation and feedback, and data analysis and action planning. The project-based learning assessments in which participants created instructional systems evaluated by the assessment team of executive directors and principals allowed them to implement methods and receive feedback as assistant principals before the principalship.

The recommendations I am making for PPPs are based on gaps identified from the Theoretical Framework and principal perceptions of gaps in their learning based on unexpected challenges and on-the-job learning that was not embedded in their curriculum and training. The practices that led to a positive impact on student outcomes will also be included within the recommendations. The following six best practices will be addressed in the recommendations:

- 1) Field-experience that involves shadowing, coaching, and residency,
- 2) On-the-Job support as a first-year principal
- 3) Instructional leadership (data analysis, observation/feedback, and PLCs)
- 4) Non-instructional systems related to campus operations
- 5) Soft skills for stakeholder engagement and communication
- 6) Transitioning from assistant principal to principal

### **Field Experience: Shadowing, Coaching, Residency**

New York Public Schools, a large urban school district, created the Aspiring Principal Program (APP) as a reform effort to train their own principals to take on the most struggling schools. Their program involves a strategic residency. Corcoran et al. (2012) state, "During the residency, the APP candidates serve as an apprentice to a practicing mentor principal, observes

teachers, and attends bi-weekly leadership development seminars." Candidates were moved to a residency where they served under higher-performing principals.

Upon acceptance into the PPPs, participants often remain in their role as assistant principals on their current campus. Continuing in their current role means that an aspiring leader could be serving at a campus with a new principal, a principal inexperienced in instructional systems, or a school struggling to reach academic goals. Consequently, some aspiring leaders may have richer learning experiences if they happen to enter the program while serving at a high performing school with a high performing leader.

I recommend principal preparation programs implement strategic residency through their candidates' placement upon acceptance. Moving aspiring leaders would cause a shift in placement within the district, but not stress to the overall district budget or the campus budget with allocations being shifted instead of being added. Serving under high performing principals would provide aspiring principals with an exemplar for instructional systems and operational systems. It would create a genuine mentor/apprentice relationship to promote coaching and distributed leadership beyond the training and project-based learning. The change would call for Mentor Principals to be recruited throughout a school district. To ensure that expectations for the residency are clear, meetings would take place to share roles and responsibilities based on a partnership between Mentor Principals and the program participants. Coaching sessions and planning would take place throughout the school year. The benefits would be a symbiotic relationship where Mentor Principals receive talented aspiring leaders based on a program's selection process. They would also engage in training to learn coaching techniques that will improve the performance and learning of program candidates. In return, aspiring leaders would have strong daily examples of campus leadership and be involved with day-to-day activities to improve leadership skills before becoming principals.

## **On-the-job Support**

In order to meet the need of first-year principals beyond completion of their respective PPP, two recommendations are being provided: 1) Assign mentors to principals who are not supervisors, serving as non-evaluative coaches to check in on their well-being, provide feedback and help them sort through leadership needs and campus issues. 2) Continue with new principal training with components similar to the training they received as aspiring leaders while in the preparation program where they have time to prepare and plan for systems, receive feedback, and time to reflect before implementation during their first year as principal.

Mendels (2012) reveals that "Evaluation and support ideally go hand in hand: A novice leader's performance is assessed; he or she then receives needed guidance to mature and overcome weaknesses over cover." Similarly, Gray et al. (2007) speak about how mentors are in a perfect position to provide substantive feedback". Providing non-evaluative coaching from someone outside of the Principal Manager role would provide new principals with additional support that would allow them to be more open and honest about their struggles to receive proper help and feedback. Mentorship for principals should come from current veteran principals or former principals who have served in the role and understand the nuances of being first-year principals.

Continued support meetings for just first-year principals will allow for reflection and questioning that could be overwhelming in meetings with veteran principals who may not have as many gaps in learning based on experience. This would allow school districts to differentiate support for first-year principals. Continuing training beyond PPPs to support new principals in the role would allow for consistency and continuity when facing new challenges and implementing new systems on campuses. Practicing and role playing before implementation of systems with staff served as a key practice that helped aspiring principals gain confidence for full roll out to their

campus staff while in PPPs. Expanding the training beyond the PPP for new principals will allow for similar struggles to come to light and receive support.

### **Instructional Leadership**

The principals who participated in the study connected to three instructional systems as best practices that contributed to their success in improving student outcomes during their first academic year as principals. The practices helped them understand their role as instructional leaders and how to implement systems to focus on improving student outcomes. I am recommending three best practices that PPPs should have as learning experiences in their curriculum, projects, and field experiences to prepare aspiring leaders to be successful in impacting student achievement whether they are taking on a campus already thriving, or a campus in need of reform strategies. The three instructional systems include: 1) data analysis, 2) coaching and feedback, and 3) professional learning communities.

The first learning experience I recommend for PPPs to promote instructional leadership is engagement with data. Data analysis within PPPs should provide a specific focus on understanding how to read data to determine strengths and weaknesses in student achievement. Participants need to learn how to celebrate wins in data that align to campus goals and how to create action steps based on weaknesses to improve outcomes after formative assessments. Engaging in learning experiences in which data was analyzed allowed participants to use data to drive instruction and make incremental gains throughout the school year. Learning how to analyze data is the starting point. One of the most effective practices was the project in which participants created leadership action plans that were used to create teacher action plans. Providing aspiring leaders with experience in how to engage teachers in the process allowed participants to engage in a reform strategy to improve student performance that was taken into their first year as campus leaders. Participants received feedback on this field experience by the assessment team to determine if

there was evidence of strategies and follow-up based on the action plan using a rubric. I recommend that PPPs provide training on data analysis and field experiences in which participants receive feedback on their implementation of data systems and action plans. Using a rubric to determine effectiveness allows feedback to be objective from assessors and fill in gaps before leading a campus on their own.

Second, I recommend that PPP participants receive training on observation and feedback using a scripted protocol that provides a choice of actionable steps based on areas of opportunity when observing teachers and a script for providing feedback within a coaching session with a teacher (after the observation) based on the actionable steps. After training with practice and role play, field-based experience should involve PPP participants receiving feedback on their feedback from the assessment team. Receiving feedback on their feedback will allow them to grow and have practice with improving the quality of instruction and continue to upgrade the practice. Gaining experience in observation and feedback will prepare aspiring leaders to diagnose and support classrooms making connections with teaching and learning to impact student outcomes.

Last, I recommend that PPP participants gain experience in leading PLCs with teachers and planning for PLCs using a scripted protocol. PLCs should focus on planning for instruction, focusing on high leverage standards, and using data to drive the focus of the PLCs. Participants should engage in training that provides experience with planning for PLCs to create agendas, choose standards for the week, and define roles within the PLCs. Whether focusing on data or good first instruction, participants should be fully prepared for PLCs before leading teachers through the process. Ensuring that aspiring leaders are prepared and organized before the PLC displays strong organization and investment in the work that teachers are doing on campus. Just as with the previous instructional systems, participants should be observed leading PLCs with a

review of planning documents to receive actionable feedback from the assessment team to focus on continuous improvement.

Practicing the instructional systems before becoming a principal allows aspiring leaders to implement and upgrade the systems that can be used when leading a campus. Experience with data analysis, observation and feedback, and PLCs while preparing to become a principal allows participants to gain confidence and become proficient in instructional leadership strategies that will improve student outcomes.

### **Learning Experiences: Campus Operations**

According to participants, the UPPA program proves to develop aspiring leaders into instructional leaders. The focus on instructional leadership equipped aspiring leaders to develop and implement instructional systems that they still use in their role as current principals. It allowed them to reach success with student achievement during their first year in the position. The primary trend that came across in principals' perceptions of their gaps in learning was the lack of campus operations experience beyond instructional systems. Participants spoke about not knowing who to call for assistance with maintenance, budget, transportation, and other items. One principal even talked about his experience of not being prepared for fall leveling meetings because of a lack of understanding of how personnel allocations are connected to the budget and student enrollment.

Filling in the operational experience gap will add a broader perspective to aspiring leaders on the campus's day-to-day operations, adding to their toolkit filled with instructional experience. Two strategies I am recommending to fill in the gap of providing operational expertise to campus leaders are 1) Training sessions to support experience with campus operations, and 2) Project and field assessment related to campus operations.

First, PPPs could add a small amount of time to focus on operational items at the end of each training session. Bringing in leaders from different departments would allow participants to



engage in learning, ask questions about the operational system, and connect names with faces when dealing with campus needs and solving issues. For example, a general budget manager or Title I administrator could share a campus budget to speak about line codes most frequently used to make purchases and meet students' needs. The same speaker could address allowable and unallowable purchases and how they align to the campus improvement plan, which serves as a federal document. Participants could engage in a scenario-based activity to gain feedback. Sessions could close with the participants being allowed to ask questions and receive contact information for future needs. This same protocol could be used at the end of each session and outlined to invite the following departments to engage with participants: Transportation, Human Capital Management, Budget, Teaching and Learning, Communications, and Employee Relations.

The second approach to learning about campus operations would involve having at least one project in which the assessment team observes and provides feedback to aspiring leaders based on a rubric; just as the projects are assessed with instructional systems. Participants engaged in developing a data action plan based on common assessment data to provide instructional strategies, coaching, and support to teachers. An extension of this project could be to create a budget to meet the instructional department's needs that involve items such as supplemental pay for tutoring, instructional resources for intervention, technology, and professional development. Rubrics for this project would be created to provide feedback on whether or not participants aligned the budget with needs and prioritized effectively to improve their department's student outcomes. The assessment of the operational system would provide aspiring leaders the opportunity to learn and implement systems beyond instruction.

### **Soft Skills**

I am recommending soft skills as a learning experience for aspiring leaders to receive experience with before becoming a principal. Within the literature, soft skills were not presented

as a key feature or best practices for PPPs. However, soft skills serve as an important balance for leaders to communicate and engage stakeholders in ways that will help to obtain buy-in when there is a need to implement change and for connecting with staff to achieve the campus vision and goals. Participants mentioned struggles with helping staff to not be satisfied with the status quo as well as having to be careful with how they share information and engage staff. I am recommending that aspiring leaders should receive experience with creating rationales for specific messages and changes for stakeholders based on common scenarios and team building exercises to make connections with staff. Scripting a rationale and role-playing during training would allow participants to receive feedback and make upgrades to their message based on wording, eye contact and body language. Participants should be taught key words that would connect with staff and how to differentiate when a message should be provided to a whole group, small groups or to individual stakeholders. Developing, leading, and practicing team building activities provides strategies for future use and opportunities to connect with staff beyond instructional and operational systems. Using campus-based scenarios would allow participants to build a toolkit of messages and activities that will promote healthy communication and buy-in with all stakeholders.

### **Transitioning**

My final recommendation for PPPs is to provide a learning experience in which participants understand how to transition from their current role (assistant principal, instructional coach, teachers, etc.) as a leader to the principalship. One study participant reflected upon how he struggled to transition between campus levels such as elementary, middle, and high school. Another participant spoke about the hardships of transitioning from assistant principal to principal on the same campus. Additionally, it is common for aspiring leaders to lead a campus in which they don't know any of the campus employees.

PPPs should track the campus that aspiring leaders are currently serving while in the program and make connections with their placement when serving as the principal of their newly assigned campus. This will help preparation programs determine support based on needs. Specifically, all participants should engage in planning to create a playbook for transitioning into the role. The transition playbook should focus on what takes place within the first 1-30 days for leading an elementary, middle, or high school campus. To complete this learning experience participants would receive training on an exemplar playbook, time to create their own playbook, and feedback on their playbooks that promotes reflection and time for them to fill in gaps and make upgrades.

### **Planning and Implementation**

As PPPs are reviewed to assess effectiveness and address gaps to build strong instructional leaders prepared to take on any public school, changes must be made to training and field-based experiences to adequately prepare aspiring leaders for success. Just as with any change or upgrade, it is essential to receive feedback from all stakeholders involved. PPPs whether at the district or university level would have to connect with former participants, sitting principals, and central staff to present and think through residency, on-the-job support, and additions to the curriculum. Changes could have a small effect on the budget as well as personnel assignments.

First, PPPs must conduct a study using the outlined protocol to allow for data collection to evaluate the effectiveness of their preparation on participants' ability to impact student outcomes. After conducting the study, the Theoretical Framework could be used as a lens to find out what has worked well to ensure success and what gaps need to be addressed within their training programs. After using the data to determine gaps, leaders would have to develop a framework that addresses how to train and assess aspiring leaders using the same lens and a common language whether with rubrics, scripts, role playing, etc.

After determining the layout for learning experiences, quality assessment teams and partners would need to be recruited and trained on rubrics and provide feedback to continue to have a common language when assessing candidates during field-based projects and learning experiences. Organizing training to align with departments' schedules would be needed to connect aspiring leaders with operational campus support. Training and selecting non-evaluative mentors to support first-year principals would be required as well. Creating a residency opportunity will impact admin teams on campuses if aspiring leaders are moved around or swapped to serve in apprenticeships with high performing principals. Communication and transparency would need to be a priority to ensure that all stakeholders are on board with the changes and can support this need to grow aspiring principals.

### **Program Funding**

To fully implement a PPP based on the recommendations, there are costs associated with recruitment, training, field-based experiences, and residency. Considerations for training cost would include the purchase of materials and software for participants, mentors, and assessors. When the training is contracted by a partnership beyond the district or university to meet the needs of the PPP, such as a non-profit organization, additional costs could be budgeted to cover individuals, coaching sessions, and materials. Additionally, funding is needed to provide “on the job” support for program participants as they take on principal roles. Quality mentorship whether choosing to pay a stipend to district or university leaders for mentoring, or paying retired principals to coach will require funding. Mentorship should serve as a budget allocation to follow aspiring leaders into their first year as principals.

### **Ethical and Political Issues**

The only ethical issues that could arise from building a PPP based on data from perceptions and gaps in learning is skewed data. Participants must feel that they can be as open and as honest

as possible without having fear of backlash based on responses. Implications of false data would not allow PPPs to obtain the data needed to fill in gaps and upgrade programs based on the intended framework. Not being able to fill in gaps, would limit the approach to addressing program needs to build strong instructional leaders.

Second, ensuring the assessment process is fair and based on rubrics and training would help to alleviate political issues that may arise when leaders want their particular person to serve as principals of specific schools or have access to the PPP even when they are not qualified. PPPs would want to ensure that aspiring leaders who may be connected to district and university leaders not receive preferential treatment during the principal selection process.

### **Research Implications**

Principal preparation, whether at the university level or from an alternative principal pipeline, is an essential component of creating school success and preventing school failure. The consequence of an unprepared first-year principal is school failure. It was vital to conduct this study to understand better how first-year principals are prepared to improve student outcomes and what practices led to success in an urban school setting. Plessis (2013) concluded that "School leaders are increasingly being challenged to take a more instructionally focused role in their schools." The study trends show that the most significant impact on student outcomes came from aspiring principals' preparation from training and project-based learning on instructional systems related to data, professional learning communities, and observation and feedback.

Further implications for principals' preparation programs should include instructional systems in the curriculum to build instructional leaders equipped to take on any school across the state and country, specifically in large urban school districts with high needs schools. Strategic residency and on-the-job coaching and support that is non-evaluative are two additional strategies

that could enhance principal preparation programs and continued support during the first academic year as principal.

Additional research studies should be conducted on principal preparation to fill in gaps in the research. Secondary principals should be interviewed using the same protocol to understand their perceptions of how the UPPA program helped them positively impact student outcomes and what additional learning they need to experience to feel more successful based on their perceived gaps. Additionally, a comparison of the successes and gaps of elementary and secondary principals could advance the understanding of principal preparation to differentiate learning and support at all levels. The possibilities for learning from participants to upgrade curriculum and learning experiences of principal preparation programs are endless.

After reviewing the literature, developing the Theoretical Framework allowed me to understand best practices that impact student outcomes within one academic year and the gaps in learning and support of aspiring principals. I believe PPPs can use its graduates' perspectives to make small upgrades to the program with a low-cost impact to ensure that all candidates successfully impact student outcomes. Believing that the principalship is one of the most significant factors determining school success inspired me to conduct this qualitative case study to understand the impact of principal preparation on student outcomes.

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## **Interview and Observation Protocol**

### **Overall Research Question**

The overall research question that will guide this qualitative study is: How does the LEAD Program increase first year principals' capacity to effectively lead a campus and produce positive student outcomes?

### **Introduction/Grand Tour Question**

Good Morning/Afternoon. My name is Tanya Shelton. Thank you for allowing me to learn from you today. The purpose of this interview is to gain your perspective on how experiences and learning from the LEAD Program prepared you to impact student outcomes within your first year as principal. There is no right or wrong answer. This interview is confidential. I want you to feel safe in sharing your perspective. I am not here to serve in a supervisory role, but as a researcher to learn more about the impact of the LEAD program. I want to assure you that your responses will not negatively impact your advancement within the district. Your information will be assigned an alias to ensure that you and your campus are not identifiable in the research study. Your alias and responses will not be shared with Dallas ISD, your supervisor, nor the School Leadership department. With your permission, I will record our conversation. The purpose of recording is to ensure that I obtain all details to be attentive in our discussion.

Q1: Talk about your pathway to the principalship. How did your journey lead you to this point in your career?

### **Defining Student Outcomes**

*Student outcomes can be described as students learning what they are expected to learn. Increases in test scores related to local and state assessments serve as an example of positively impacting student outcomes.*

Q2: What was the condition of your campus before your arrival as principal in reference to student outcomes? Probe: What did the historical student achievement data tell you about your school?

Q3: How would you define your role in impacting student outcomes?

### **Conceptual Framework**

Q4: How did the LEAD program impact your belief and ability to lead this campus within your first year as principal?

Q5: What types of training and activities did you engage in through the LEAD Program do you consider to be the greatest asset to your ability to positively impact student outcomes within your first year as principal?

Q6: What are some best practices you believe lead to positive student outcomes and how did the LEAD program prepare you to implement or refine some of those practices on your campus?

Q7: What did you perceive to be the most significant learning experience that you gained from the LEAD program that you rely on the most as a principal?

Q8: In your opinion, what type of gaps in learning would you have experienced if you were not a graduate of the LEAD program?

Q9: Describe some unexpected challenges you faced. How did your experience in LEAD prepare or not prepare you for these challenges? How did the LEAD program prepare you to adjust to what comes from the on the job experience or things you may not know?

Q10: Would you suggest the LEAD Program to other aspiring principals within our district? What do you feel they would gain from graduating from this program that they would not if moving directly from an assistant principal position to a principal position?

### **Concluding Question**

Q11: Thanks for taking time out of your schedule to allow me to learn from you today. This interview allowed me to gain insight on the impact of the LEAD Program's ability to prepare aspiring leaders to impact student outcomes within our district. Before we conclude this interview, is there anything else you would like to share related to your learning or preparation to become a principal?

## **Recruitment Script**

Dear Colleague:

While completing my Doctoral Program at Southern Methodist University, I am conducting a research study and would love for you to participate so that I can learn from you. Because of your success as a first-year principal, you qualify to participate in the study. My research approval documents are attached. It is important for you to know that your feedback will be anonymous and assigned an alias. Please review the script provided below and feel free to contact me with any questions.

### **SMU EXEMPT LEVEL PARTICIPATION EXPLANATION AND CONSENT SCRIPT**

We are conducting a research study to learn more about principal perceptions of the Dallas ISD LEAD Program's ability to increase first year principals' capacity to effectively lead a campus and produce positive student outcomes. Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you agree to take part and then change your mind, you can withdraw for any reason. There are no penalties if you withdraw, decline to participate, or skip any parts of the study. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to participate in an individual interview via Zoom. You will need to have access to an internet connection to participate in the interview. Please indicate the date you wish to participate in the interview and your email address where the invitation for the Zoom session may be sent using the link below. The interview will be video and audio recorded using Zoom to capture your experience in the LEAD Program. Your participation should take about 60 to 90-minutes. There are no known risks associated with participating in this study. The potential benefits of this study are to understand what learning experiences are needed in principal preparation programs to impact student outcomes and how the learning experiences could be used to upgrade principal preparation programs in urban school districts. Would you like to participate in this research study?

Please respond to the email to confirm and then use the link to set a date and a calendar invite will be sent to you. You will receive a gift card for your participation.

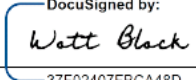
<https://calendly.com/tanyashelton/research-study-principal-perceptions>

### DISSERTATION APPROVAL

This dissertation submitted by Tanya Shelton has been read and approved by the following faculty members of the Annette Caldwell Simmons School of Education and Human Development at Southern Methodist University. The final copy has been examined by the Dissertation Committee and the signatures which appear here verify the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated and that the dissertation is now given the final approval with reference to content, form and mechanical accuracy.

The dissertation is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education.

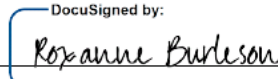
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