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## Readiness to Lead: Novice School Leaders' Perceptions of the IMPACT Arkansas Fellowship Experience on Their Preparedness to Assume School Leadership Roles

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Readiness to Lead: Novice School Leaders' Perceptions of the IMPACT Arkansas Fellowship  
Experience on Their Preparedness to Assume School Leadership Roles

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education in Adult and Lifelong Learning

by

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## **Abstract**

Research provides increasing evidence that school leadership correlates with school performance (Herman et al., 2016). The leadership skills of K-12 school administrators are linked with student achievement. Evidence indicates that school leaders' roles continue to evolve as accountability measures change (Grissom et al., 2021).

Historically, principal preparation programs emphasized developing management skills. According to research, this is insufficient to prepare instructional leaders for the complex social context of contemporary education (Hernandez et al., 2012; Kerston, 2010; Levine, 2005; Lynch, 2012; Miller, 2013; Zubrzycki, 2013). Unfortunately, most principal preparation programs (PPPs) have not kept pace with the expanding role of principals to meet the evolving demands of modern school administrators (Bacon, 2016; Kersten et al., 2010; Mitgang 2012). Insufficient research has been conducted to evaluate if emerging PPPs develop instructional leaders who are more prepared than graduates of standard academic programs. This study might provide information on the efficacy of such initiatives.

The IMPACT Arkansas Fellowship is an innovative alternative to a conventional educational leadership program. It is designed to provide individualized experiences and support to better equip aspiring school leaders for formal leadership positions in Arkansas high-poverty schools. This qualitative study aims to examine how recent graduates perceive the IMPACT Arkansas Fellowship program to have prepared them for the complexities of school leadership, as well as their levels of self-efficacy associated with the effective application of leadership knowledge and skills. More specifically, the study intends to illuminate the relationship between IMPACT PPP components and self-efficacy through an analysis of graduates' perceptions of their leadership preparation experiences.

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## Chapter 1 Study Overview

### Introduction

The IMPACT Arkansas Fellowship is a scholarship-funded, innovative principal preparation program at the University of Arkansas established to address the shortage of principals across the country, particularly in Arkansas' high-poverty schools (Pijanowski & Peer, 2016). Created in 2015 based on research on principal preparation programs (PPPs), IMPACT aims to enhance leadership development efforts for prospective formal leaders in high-poverty K-12 public and public charter schools in Arkansas (Pijanowski & Peer, 2016). In addition to a shortage of principals, the importance of principal tenure has been underscored in previous studies. First, the national average for principal tenure is only four years, and one in five principals leave after just one year in districts with high-poverty rates (Levin et al., 2019). Secondly, research commissioned by the Wallace Foundation indicates that it takes around five years with a new administrator for a school's performance to rebound to its prior level of achievement at a minimum (Leithwood & Seashore-Louis, 2011). Principal turnover negatively affects student test scores and teacher retention. Test scores fall in the first year of the transition and continue to decline for three years of the new principal's tenure. Similarly, teacher turnover increases during the same time period (Henry & Harbatkin, 2019). This reflects the significance of principal turnover, which stands at 30% across all K-12 public schools in the United States. Moreover, in low socio-economic districts, it stands at 40% (Beteille et al., 2012; Grissom et al., 2021).

Arkansas's high-poverty communities face difficulties in attracting competent leaders from outside their area and building their own leadership pipelines (Pijanowski & Peer, 2016). Additionally, leaders from other school communities may be hesitant to move into high-poverty

areas and struggle to fit into the local culture. Therefore, it is important to identify potential teacher leaders within these communities to fill vacancies. Unfortunately, these leaders often lack specialized leadership pre-service training that addresses their school's specific needs (Pijanowski & Peer, 2016). To address this problem, the IMPACT program aims to assist high-poverty schools, where more than 70% of students receive free or reduced lunch prices, in developing effective models to identify promising candidates for formal school leadership roles. Through participation in IMPACT, leaders who are already rooted in their local communities will receive customized training and support designed to improve academic outcomes for students in high-poverty Arkansas schools (Pijanowski & Peer, 2016).

The IMPACT Arkansas Fellowship was designed to be scalable and integrated into the traditional principal preparation program, rather than remain as an alternative program existing in addition to the traditional principal preparation program at the University of Arkansas (Pijanowski & Peer, 2016). Since its establishment in 2015, eight cohorts have been selected to participate in the program, and currently, there are 148 fellows, of which 106 have graduated and 42 are currently participating. Out of the 106 IMPACT graduates, 43 are now serving as formal leaders in high-needs schools in Arkansas, such as instructional facilitators, assistant principals, or principals (J. Bacon, personal communication, March 28, 2023).

It is worth noting that 92% of all IMPACT participants are serving in high-poverty schools in Arkansas, from the first graduates in 2017 to the present. After eight years of selecting and graduating 106 IMPACT participants, with 43 now serving as formal school leaders, it is important to understand the fellows' perceptions of their self-efficacy in assuming complex leadership roles as a result of their participation in the program (J. Bacon, personal communication, March 28, 2023).



This chapter will provide further details on IMPACT, including why this study is necessary, the gap in current research, the research problem, the research questions, and the research approach. The researcher's perspectives and assumptions will also be discussed, along with the rationale and significance of this study.

### **Background**

Evidence indicates that school leaders' roles continue to evolve as accountability measures change. As the evolution of principal roles continues, ever-increasing responsibilities are added to the existing responsibilities creating heavier burdens (Grissom et al., 2021; Manna, 2015). Traditionally, principal preparation programs heavily developed building management competencies such as budgeting and managing human resources. However, research indicates that this alone is insufficient to prepare instructional leaders for modern education's complex social environment (Kersten et al., 2010). Many formal PPPs have not attempted significant revision to address the increasingly complex needs of current school administrators (Bacon, 2016; Kersten et al., 2010).

The roles and responsibilities of school leaders have undergone multiple changes due to revisions in educational policies starting from The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965 to the current Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015. The revisions aimed to address the perception that the nation's schools were inadequately preparing students for college and career readiness, resulting in increased transparency of achievement gaps among diverse subgroups (Bacon, 2016; NCLB, 2002). These policies tied funding to performance goals to incentivize schools to improve student outcomes, leading to revisions in school and district-level leadership standards to guide innovation in serving diverse student populations (NPBEA, 2015). To ensure that educators are equipped to effectively lead schools that prepare students for

future careers, educational leadership standards such as the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSELs) were developed (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008; NPBEA, 2015).

The 2015 revision of the PSELs places a greater emphasis on student learning, providing educational leaders with guiding principles to ensure that every child is well-educated and prepared for the 21st century, according to the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (2015). However, these specific guiding principals' skills were lacking among recent PPP graduates (Young, 2015). Davis and Darling-Hammond (2012) assert that the problems with PPPs stem from (1) a lack of understanding of the current problems facing school leaders and how to prepare them to meet these challenges and (2) a lack of consistent methods for monitoring and assessing the impact of their program on the leadership practices of graduates. As per Murphy et al. (2017) and Young (2017), PPPs have not been able to adjust to the changing political environment and accountability measures to effectively equip school leaders with the necessary skills to address current challenges.

Bacon (2016) conducted a quantitative study to examine principals' perceptions of the contributions made by their PPPs to their overall improvement in skill level and knowledge relating to the PSELs. His research focused on the hands-on activities of the internship process as influential to leaders' success. The internship is a period of time during the aspiring leaders' college work where they apply learning in some leadership activities and projects within their school setting under the supervision of the current principal and college supervisor. Bacon's research found that the nature of the internship experiences in the participants' schools was primarily responsible for enhancing organizational management. The results further indicate that respondents' perceptions of their own leadership preparation experiences excluded sufficient

components of experiential learning in the key areas of visionary, ethical, and cultural leadership. Influenced by Bacon's (2016) research, the development of the IMPACT Arkansas Fellowship internship experience was designed to align with the revised PSELs to address the missing leadership components necessary to improve the leadership skills of aspiring school leaders in Arkansas.

Crow and Whiteman (2016) explored multiple studies and synthesized the empirical findings and their implications on leadership preparation programs. While addressing several varied directions for future research, the authors acknowledge that most research on leadership preparation is descriptive. Crow and Whiteman (2016) found that existing research included identified characteristics of graduates but does not address identification of characteristics of the candidates who entered the program or if the graduates' characteristics changed as a result of some element of the PPP. It is necessary to conduct additional research to ascertain the outcomes of field experiences and the mentoring processes of PPPs (Crow & Whiteman, 2016). Internal factors identified as possibly negatively impacting university-based PPPs included inability to monitor quality and weak research on program effectiveness (Cibulka, 2009). Further research is needed concerning participants' readiness to lead after completing a principal preparation program (Perrone & Tucker, 2019).

### **IMPACT Arkansas Fellowship**

#### **Context**

The IMPACT program is a scholarship-funded principal preparation program that prioritizes innovative approaches and structured support for reflective teaching practices in line with the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSELs). This program was developed with the input of research on recommended design elements of PPPs and the PSELs (Davis et al.,

2012; Espinoza & Cardichon, 2017; Mitgang, 2012). Its design is based on established best practices and research available in 2015. Domains considered in the program's development include: 1) Research-based curriculum, 2) Cohort model, 3) Partnerships between university and districts, 4) Opportunity to put theory into practice with hands-on internships, 5) Rigorous selection processes for participants, and 6) individualized support (J. Bacon, personal communication, September 1, 2017). Researchers have found that providing personalized training and support tailored to the specific context of schools can be advantageous for developing future leaders (Davis et al., 2012; Espinoza & Cardichon, 2017; Mitgang, 2012). To this end, the IMPACT program is designed to nurture and assist aspiring leaders who are committed to serving their high-poverty communities and have shown leadership potential (J. Bacon, personal communication, September 1, 2017). The IMPACT Arkansas Fellowship program will be discussed in more detail in the following sections.

### **Vision and Mission**

The overarching goal of the IMPACT program is to develop highly effective leaders who are committed to serving in their high-needs communities and possess the necessary dispositions, knowledge, and applicable skills to enhance educational outcomes for students in Arkansas high-poverty schools. IMPACT's mission is continuous development of an innovative and effective model for identifying, preparing, and providing ongoing support for leaders in partnership with high-poverty schools in Arkansas. These schools are defined as having a minimum of 70% of students receiving free or reduced lunch prices. IMPACT collaborates with high-needs schools in Arkansas to identify individuals with high potential for leadership development who are already established in the school community and plan to stay at their current schools. This model

prioritizes practicality and personalized support tailored to individual leadership and school community needs (J. Bacon, personal communication, September 1, 2017).

### **Staff and Faculty**

The IMPACT team is composed of university professors and adjunct professors who were carefully selected based on their expertise in practice, as well as the IMPACT staff which includes a program director, two directors of support, and a director of outreach. The directors of support function as leadership advisors and coaches, helping fellows apply the theoretical knowledge learned in their coursework to their current high-poverty school settings, while also developing their ability to reflect on their knowledge and practice to increase their leadership capacity. The director of outreach is primarily responsible for the recruitment process to identify potential applicants for the rigorous selection process. Meanwhile, the traditional and adjunct professors are responsible for developing and delivering coursework through synchronous online formats (J. Bacon, personal communication, September 1, 2017).

### **Program Design**

#### ***Recruitment and Selection Process***

IMPACT employs a highly coordinated recruitment process for selecting fellows. Prior to accepting applications, IMPACT's director of outreach conducts informational presentations to school and district administrators to help identify potential applicants who meet the program's criteria and the needs of the school community. The selection process consists of four phases, starting with the completion of an online application by the candidate, which requires a letter of recommendation from the school principal and a teaching video sample. The IMPACT staff reviews the application materials to ensure that the applicant's school meets the program's poverty school requirements. Typically, 40 out of 60 to 100 applicants are selected to move to

the second phase, which is the interview. In the interview stage, the questions aim to help staff identify the applicant's attitudes and beliefs toward the potential for improvement in their high-needs school and their ability to contribute to this growth process. Additionally, the applicant's teaching video is reviewed to evaluate their level of self-awareness and ability to receive feedback. Around 30 candidates proceed to phase three, which involves an interview with their school principal to assess their support for the candidate and their potential to collaborate with the IMPACT team for school improvement. Typically, 25 applicants advance to the fourth and final stage in the selection process. Phase four is an in-person, small group, high-needs school scenario problem-solving activity that culminates in a formal presentation to the selection panel consisting of all IMPACT staff. Individual interviews are conducted by the panel following the group activity. This final phase is designed to determine the applicant's ability to: engage the data to identify and solve complex school problems, work with others as a team, contemplate their contributions, and demonstrate the dispositions necessary to benefit from the leadership development provided by the IMPACT program (J. Bacon, personal communication, September 1, 2017).

The selection of fellows for IMPACT is a complex process that considers various criteria. Some of these criteria include the potential of the applicant as evaluated through the selection process, the needs of the school, the geographical location, the level of support provided by the local public school administration, the applicant's ongoing commitment to their high-poverty school, and their potential for leadership responsibilities and roles in their current school (J. Bacon, personal communication, September 1, 2017). This rigorous selection process ensures that only the most qualified and committed candidates are chosen for the program (Pijanowski & Peer, 2016).

### ***Master's Level Coursework***

Fellows are admitted to the University of Arkansas where they take the required 10 courses to obtain a master's degree in educational leadership. Both full-time faculty and adjunct professors teach the courses (Pijanowski & Peer, 2016). The IMPACT program course delivery differs from the traditional university course delivery in that the courses are offered one at a time in 8-week sections instead of the traditional 16 weeks. Another variation is that the IMPACT fellows attend all courses in rotation with their cohort members. The course rotation is completed in 18 months (J. Bacon, personal communication, March 28, 2023).

### ***Rigorous, Project-based Internship***

Fellows enrolled in IMPACT complete 14 leadership projects that are tailored to their high-needs school context and are aligned with coursework, PSELs, and research-based leadership skills necessary for effective principals in such schools. These projects are collaborative and aim to build leadership capacity in areas such as managing school operations, developing a shared mission and vision, hiring quality personnel, and fostering critical reflection and school culture improvement. Additionally, fellows work on projects related to curriculum and academic data, setting goals, and monitoring progress through collective practices with cohort members and school team members. Building relationships and partnerships with all school stakeholders in high-poverty settings is also emphasized. The internship is available for the entire 18-month program and is guided by the directors of support, who offer virtual and on-site coaching and advisement to help fellows adapt their projects to their unique school settings, and partner with local school administrators for their development (J. Bacon, personal communication, September 1, 2017).

### ***Special Topics***

The IMPACT special topics course is developed annually based on the current educational trends and needs of the fellows. IMPACT staff partner with professional learning instructors to offer additional professional development including: facilitating adult learning, creating a mission and vision based on core beliefs, increasing teacher instructional capacity, and becoming a skilled agent for change. Other topics include trauma-informed instruction and equity in education. Professional learning objectives change as needs change in Arkansas education (J. Bacon, personal communication, September 1, 2017).

### ***Individualized Coaching***

Throughout the fellowship, the directors of support serve as leadership coaches for the fellows. Participants engage in various activities throughout the program, including two 45-minute coaching sessions per month, three site visits per semester from their support director while they work in their school setting, four virtual cohort sessions per semester, and three professional development sessions on specific topics. The coaching sessions focus on strengths-based and reflective coaching practices that fellows can utilize in their future leadership positions, while their coaches assist them in setting personal leadership objectives. The coach serves as a thought partner and provides feedback during real-time coaching sessions and site visits (J. Bacon, personal communication, September 1, 2017).

### ***Intended Outcomes***

#### ***Short-term Outcomes***

The purpose of the IMPACT Arkansas Fellowship is to train and develop highly effective leaders who can demonstrate mastery of the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders by successfully passing the School Leaders Licensure Assessment (SLLA). The program aims to



produce reflective practitioners who are committed to lifelong learning and can drive positive change in impoverished school settings. The ultimate goal is to prepare graduates to take on leadership positions and be ready to meet the challenges of the role from day one (J. Bacon, personal communication, September 1, 2017).

### ***Mid-term Outcomes***

School functioning is expected to improve as a result of the leadership of highly effective IMPACT graduates. Evidence of improvement includes teacher satisfaction and agency as informal leaders, while attendance and school culture improve in tandem with a reduced rate of teacher turnover (J. Bacon, personal communication, September 1, 2017).

### ***Long-term Outcomes***

The development of highly effective leaders of schools in high-needs communities are expected to culminate in improved student outcomes. Student attendance, engagement, and graduation rates are expected to increase during the IMPACT graduate's leadership tenure. Expectations also include increases in student satisfaction, voice, and agency. All of the intended outcomes serve as metrics for reporting effectiveness of the IMPACT Arkansas Fellowship (J. Bacon, personal communication, September 1, 2017).

## **Problem Statement**

According to Herman et al. (2016), school leadership is strongly correlated with school performance. The success of K-12 students is directly related to the abilities of school leaders. Grissom et al. (2021) state that the impact of school principals is of paramount importance, with successful efforts to improve principal leadership having a high potential return on investment. However, the role of school leaders is constantly evolving alongside changes in accountability

measures, and research is lacking or inconsistent on how to prepare principals for the rigors of modern school leadership in high-needs schools (Bacon, 2016; George W. Bush Institute, 2016).

Traditionally, PPPs have focused on building management competencies, but research indicates that this alone is insufficient for preparing instructional leaders for the complex social environment of modern education (Kerston et al., 2010). Unfortunately, most PPPs have not kept pace with the changing needs of school administrators, according to Bacon (2016), Kersten et al. (2010), and Mitgang (2012). Furthermore, there is a lack of research on whether emerging and innovative PPPs are more effective at producing well-prepared instructional leaders than traditional programs (Prothero, 2017). This study aims to fill this gap in the literature by providing insights into the effectiveness of one such program intended to produce highly effective principals for high-poverty schools in Arkansas.

### **Purpose Statement and Research Questions**

The IMPACT Arkansas Fellowship is a novel educational leadership program offered by a university. It is designed to provide personalized experiences and support to equip aspiring leaders with the skills and knowledge necessary for formal leadership positions in Arkansas K-12 public and public charter schools in low socioeconomic communities. The program's primary goal is to improve school performance in high-poverty areas of the state. This qualitative research study aims to investigate how recent graduates perceived the effectiveness of the IMPACT Arkansas Fellowship program in preparing them for school leadership complexities and developing self-efficacy in applying effective leadership knowledge and skills.

This research will explore the novice school leaders' perceptions of their preparedness to lead owing to the IMPACT Arkansas Fellowship experiences. In doing so, the study will address the following questions:

1. How did IMPACT Arkansas Fellowship leadership pre-service experiences prepare graduates to assume a school leader role?
2. What specific pre-service experiences were perceived as beneficial to novice leaders?
3. How relevant were the pre-service experiences to the graduate's high-poverty school community?
4. Did the pre-service experiences influence graduates' confidence in their ability to carry out necessary leadership behaviors and actions to achieve desired results?
5. What additional pre-service experiences would help prepare future graduates, and how would they be beneficial to novice leaders?

### **Research Design**

A qualitative approach, specifically a case study, will be used because of the multidimensional nature of the data to be collected from multiple perspectives for interpretation. Yin (2003) defines a case study as “the method of choice when the phenomenon under study is not readily distinguishable from its context” (p. 5). Although the study is not meant to be a program evaluation, evaluation frameworks provided by Guskey (2000) will serve as a conceptual lens for developing the study's research questions and interpreting data. The aim is to gain a deeper understanding of how the shared learning experiences provided by the IMPACT program prepare effective school leaders for diverse school communities. This involves examining higher levels of analysis than reporting on participant satisfaction.

Guskey's (2000) five levels of information provide a hierarchical framework for evaluating professional development programs. These were adapted from Kirkpatrick's Model developed in 1959 for assessing the value of supervisory training in the industry. Guskey (2000) expanded the framework to include "why" questions as well as "what" questions, making it more

applicable to the educational field of professional learning. The five levels of information are arranged hierarchically from simple to complex and are presented in Table 1 of Guskey's model. The researcher will consider the evaluation levels one, two, and three of this model to interpret how IMPACT fellows construct new meaning for practice in their schools as they describe their perceptions. Additional levels of this evaluation model could prove beneficial to broaden understanding over time.

For this study, criterion sampling will be used to select participants, which Creswell (2018) suggests is a valuable approach when seeking to answer research questions related to a specific phenomenon. This strategy will ensure that the participants share a common experience, which is essential to this study's focus. The study is bounded by exploring the perspectives of IMPACT graduates, and the interview questions will be designed based on Bandura's (1977) Self-Efficacy Theory.

**Table 1*****Guskey Professional Development Assessment Model***

Evaluation Level	What Questions Addressed?	How Gather Information?	What is Assessed?
Participant's Reactions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Did they like it?</li> <li>• Was their time well spent?</li> <li>• Did the material make sense?</li> <li>• Will it be useful?</li> <li>• Was the leader knowledgeable and helpful?</li> <li>• Were the refreshments fresh and tasty?</li> <li>• Was the room the right temperature?</li> <li>• Were the chairs comfortable?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Questionnaires administered at the end of the session.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Initial satisfaction with the experience</li> </ul>
Participant's Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Did participants acquire the intended knowledge and skills?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Paper-and-pencil instruments</li> <li>• Simulations</li> <li>• Demonstrations</li> <li>• Participant reflections (oral and/or written)</li> <li>• Participant portfolios</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New knowledge and skills of participants</li> </ul>
Organization Support and Change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What was the impact on the organization?</li> <li>• Did it affect organizational climate and procedures?</li> <li>• Was implementation advocated, facilitated, and supported?</li> <li>• Were problems addressed quickly and efficiently?</li> <li>• Were sufficient resources made available?</li> <li>• Were successes recognized and shared?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• District and school records</li> <li>• Minutes from follow-up meetings.</li> <li>• Questionnaires</li> <li>• Structured interviews with participants and district or school administrators</li> <li>• Participant portfolios</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The organization's advocacy, support, accommodation, facilitation, and recognition.</li> </ul>

Participant's Use of Knowledge and Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Did participants effectively apply the new knowledge and skills?</li> <li>• (How are participants using what they learned?)</li> <li>• (What challenge are participants encountering?)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Questionnaires</li> <li>• Structures interviews with participants and their supervisors</li> <li>• Participant reflections (oral and/or written)</li> <li>• Participant portfolios</li> <li>• Direct observations</li> <li>• Video or audio tapes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Degree and quality of implementation</li> </ul>
Student Learning Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What was the impact on students?</li> <li>• Did it affect student performance or achievement?</li> <li>• Did it influence students' physical or emotional well-being?</li> <li>• Are students more confident as learners?</li> <li>• Is student attendance improving?</li> <li>• Are dropouts decreasing?</li> <li>• (How does the new learning affect other aspects of the organization?)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student records</li> <li>• School records</li> <li>• Questionnaires</li> <li>• Structured interviews with students, parents, teachers, and/or administrators</li> <li>• Participant portfolios</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student learning outcomes:</li> <li>• Cognitive (Performance &amp; Achievement)</li> <li>• Affective (Attitudes &amp; Dispositions)</li> <li>• Psychomotor (Skills &amp; Behaviors)</li> <li>• (Student Work Samples)</li> <li>• State/Local Assessments)</li> <li>• (Performance Assessments)</li> </ul>

## Theoretical Framework

Bandura's (1977) Self-Efficacy Theory guides the study. The purpose of the study is to examine the effects of the IMPACT Arkansas Fellowship program on graduates' perceptions of their preparedness for leadership. Bandura (1994) defines self-efficacy as a person's confidence in their ability to exert control over their own functioning and life-altering events. The theory stems from Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), which posits that learning occurs through observing models. SCT was originally called Social Learning Theory, but Bandura (1993) suggested that learning and motivation are cognitive processes. Bandura's theory holds that individuals can choose their behaviors based on their environment and that environmental reinforcers, including rewards, acknowledgment, punishment, criticism, or self-evaluation, lead to self-regulation of learning by creating expectations for outcomes. As a result, self-regulation leads to a cognitive shift and is reflected in behaviors (Bandura, 1993; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). Bandura (1977) also emphasized that learning is separate from performance, arguing that performing a behavior is not a requirement for learning it. This is critical to constructing knowledge for aspiring leaders to be prepared on day one as a novice principal.

Four sources contribute to the development of self-efficacy, according to the Social Cognitive Theory: 1) mastery experiences, 2) vicarious experiences, 3) verbal or social persuasion, and 4) physiological or emotional elements. Table 2 provides a graphic representation of these sources. Personal mastery experiences result in accomplishments in performance. Self-efficacy is bolstered by activities that involve resilience and persistence (Bandura, 1994). Performance expectations and observing others' behavior are factors that affect self-efficacy. Verbal persuasion can also contribute to the development of self-efficacy by convincing individuals that they have the ability to handle difficult situations and providing

support for positive actions. Psychological factors like coping mechanisms, vulnerability, and fear can also influence self-efficacy. Activities that contribute to self-efficacy are those that help individuals manage stressful situations (Bandura, 1977). The IMPACT design includes a cohort model, contextual projects, and leadership coaching to provide opportunities to develop self-efficacy.

Research shows that low-income school principals need high self-efficacy. Self-efficacy helps high-poverty school principals overcome obstacles and perform better (Garcia-Valesquez, 2019). According to Sullivan (2013), principal self-efficacy beliefs are influenced by personality attributes, eagerness to improve teacher capacity, high expectations, and a strong belief in children despite socioeconomic challenges. Research also shows that PPP practices can boost a principal's self-efficacy, which is nuanced and formed through their particular experiences and situations (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2007; Versland, 2016). In particular, Versland (2016) suggested incorporating Bandura's (1986) four sources of efficacy beliefs-mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and positive psychological states-into PPPs to boost self-efficacy. Activities should consider these sources while focusing on relationship building. Extended internships allow participants to work together applying newly learned skills to tackle real school improvement issues. Cohort members can also teach fellow participants what works and what needs alteration. PPPs should develop participants' psychological capacity to respond to obstacles through modeling and practice. Extensive support and verbal persuasion will build self-efficacy and perseverance during the internship and PPP (Versland, 2016).

Bandura's (1977) Self-Efficacy Theory influenced the development of the IMPACT Arkansas Fellowship program and is a helpful lens to explore participants' perceptions of their preparedness for a given situation or role. Common influences of self-efficacy and a principal

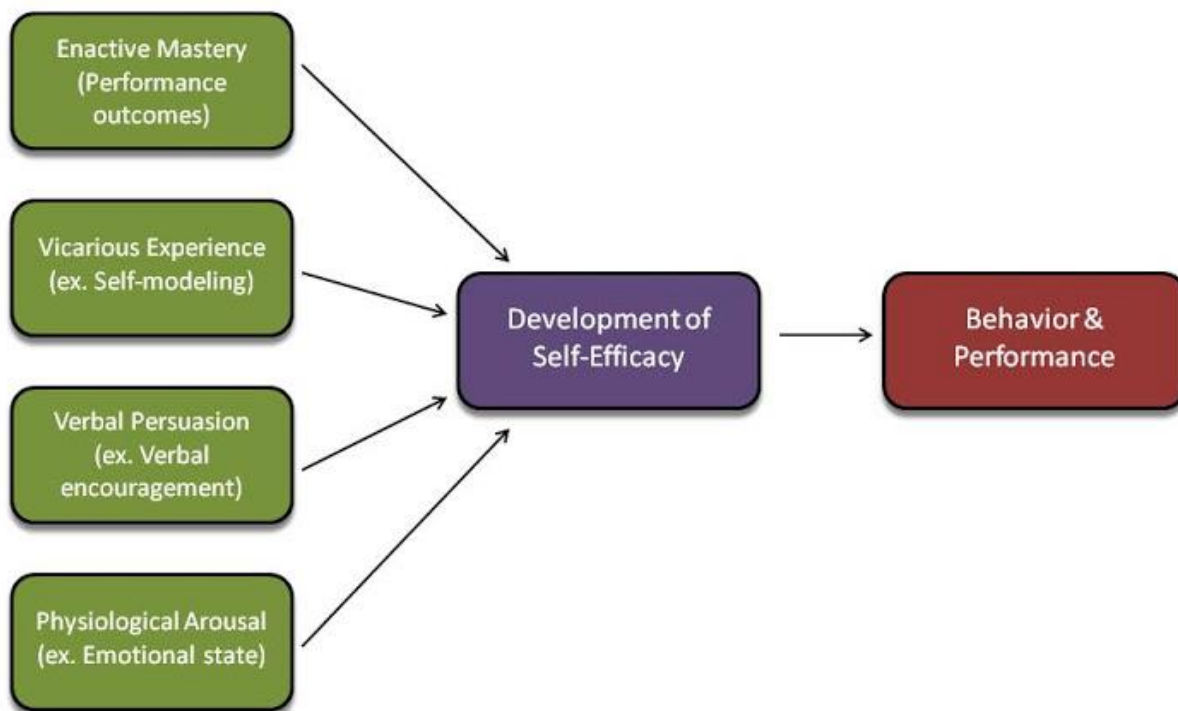


preparation program will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 2. This study examines the links between all components of the IMPACT Arkansas Fellowship program and the perceptions of novice leaders' leadership readiness.

**Table 2**

*Sources of Self-Efficacy*

## Sources of Self-Efficacy



### Rationale and Significance

This research will augment the existing literature on emerging principal training programs. By honing in on the perspectives of recent alumni who have completed a customized and innovative pre-service preparation curriculum, which was originally informed by relevant research, the study will assess the efficacy of the IMPACT Arkansas Fellowship. Through

gathering data on the perceived advantageous experiences of recent graduates and identifying potential areas for adjustment, the study aims to offer insights that could be utilized to enhance the preparedness of IMPACT Arkansas Fellowship graduates for leadership roles. Ultimately, the information gathered may guide the formation of sound conclusions and recommendations for refining the program.

### **Researcher Perspectives**

The researcher possesses a wealth of knowledge in the field of education in Arkansas, having worked as a local and state administrator for 25 years. In addition, they have a first-hand understanding of the IMPACT Arkansas Fellowship program, having been involved in its development and provision of personalized support for aspiring leaders in high-poverty school buildings.

As a director of support, coach, and assistant instructor with IMPACT, the researcher holds a position of authority over all 106 graduates, and had established strong relationships through their role as a leadership coach and advisor. Although around 75 of the participants were the researcher's coachees, measures will be taken to prevent researcher bias and avoid any potential bias on the part of the participants towards the researcher.

### **Researcher Assumptions**

The researcher assumes the efficacy of leadership in a struggling school is of the greatest importance to improve school outcomes. The researcher also assumes recent graduates who are in formal leadership positions will be able to provide information that will reveal trends in the current needs of students. The trends inform the discussion of important aspects of principal preparation for school leaders' perceptions of self-efficacy. As the school leader is second only

to direct instruction relating to improving school outcomes, PPPS must be developed, assessed, and redesigned to successfully prepare highly effective school leaders.

### **Definitions**

The following are definitions and acronyms relevant to the study:

*Administrator* – Refers to the school principal or assistant principal position in this study.

*High-needs schools* – According to the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, a school is considered as high-need if it falls within the top 25% of elementary and secondary schools statewide if it is located in an area where at least 30% of students come from families living below the poverty line or experiences a high rate of unfilled teaching positions.

Additionally, a school may be classified as high-need if it has a high percentage of out-of-field teachers, a high rate of teacher turnover, or a high percentage of teachers who lack proper certification or licensing (NCLB, 2002).

*High-Poverty School* – Refers to schools with 70 % or greater of the student population qualifying for free or reduced lunch prices for the purposes of this study (Impact approach, n.d.).

*IMPACT Arkansas Leadership Program* – The University of Arkansas offers a grant-funded master's program in educational leadership with a niche focus on preparing aspiring school leaders for high-poverty K-12 public and public charter schools in Arkansas. This innovative program features a cohort model that promotes collaboration and shared learning among participants, as well as individualized leadership coaching and supervision to support the experiential learning process during internships. Additionally, the program emphasizes the importance of critical thought partnership (Impact approach, n.d.).

*“Niche” Training* – Specialized principal-training programs that aim to fill knowledge gaps and prepare school leaders for specific real-world challenges. This type of programming

can be both separate from traditional, certificate earning programs, or folded into them (Prothero, 2017).

*Novice* – Denotes school leaders with five years or less experience in this study.

*Perception of the level of self-efficacy* – Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2004) define principal self-efficacy as a judgment of one’s own “... capabilities to structure a particular course of action in order to produce desired outcomes in the school he or she leads” (p. 573).

*Principal* – A school’s recognized instructional leader responsible for the administration and supervision of the operation and management of the schools or school properties to which they are assigned (Portsmouth Public Schools, 2019).

*Principal Preparation Program (PPP)* – A state-accredited program of study that fully or partially prepares educators for certification as a school principal (Yoder, et al., 2014, p. 1).

*PSELs* – The Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSELs), formerly known as the ISLLC standards, are student-centered standards outlining foundational principles of leadership that guide the practice of educational leaders in improving student outcomes. A set of 10 standards were released in 2015 by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (Grissom et al., 2021).

*School leader* – a principal, assistant principal, or another individual who is (A) an employee or officer of an elementary school or secondary school, local educational agency, or other entity operating an elementary school or secondary school; and (B) responsible for the daily instructional leadership and managerial operations in the elementary school or secondary school building (ESSA, 2015, p. 297).

*SLLA* – The School Leaders Licensure Assessment (SLLA) is a test used by several states, including Arkansas, to grant a credential to become a K-12 school administrator.

## **Summary**

This chapter presents an overview of the study topic, providing background information and identifying the problem. It outlines the context of the IMPACT Arkansas Fellowship program and explains the purpose of the proposed study, which aims to fill a gap in research. The chapter also includes the research questions and definitions of key terms. Specifically, this case study will investigate recent graduates' perceptions of the IMPACT Arkansas Fellowship program to understand how their experiences in the program influenced their perceived effectiveness as novice leaders. The study seeks to identify ways to improve training of pre-service school leaders to meet the complex challenges of leading today's schools.

## **Chapter 2 Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore how recent graduates perceive the IMPACT Arkansas Fellowship program prepared them for the complexities associated with school leadership and levels of self-efficacy associated with effective leadership knowledge and skills application in high-poverty schools. A body of research suggests the role of the K-12 principal has evolved and expanded, and that principal preparation programs (PPPs) are not keeping pace with effectively preparing graduates for these multifaceted and layered responsibilities (Hernandez et al., 2012; Levine, 2005; Lynch, 2012; Miller, 2013; Zubnzycki, 2013). In particular, research demonstrates that effective principals implement initiatives that impact teaching and learning, organizational norms, and community support (George W. Bush Institute, 2016). Each of these initiatives is directly linked to the necessary school improvement measures (Public Impact, 2008). School reform has placed a premium on the principal's role in creating high-performing schools and increasing student achievement for all students (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Brown, 2016). Findings also indicate that principals can positively influence student achievement if they have received an effective leadership education (Orphanos & Orr, 2014). Consequently, leadership development or training has risen to the forefront of school reform strategies (Branch et al., 2013; Brown, 2015). This realization, coupled with shifts in principal responsibilities, makes "how to better prepare leaders for the role of principal" a pressing matter of policy (George W. Bush Institute, 2016).

Chapter two will provide an overview of the relevant literature surrounding the development of principal accountability, the historical design of PPPs, and the recommended design elements to better understand the current principal expectations in high-stakes

accountability schools of today and the needs of preparation for the complexities associated with school leadership. This aims to better prepare leaders for 21<sup>st</sup>-century schools, as well as the challenges of leading in high-needs schools.

Journal articles, dissertations, foundation reports, and books relating to the expectations of principals and the needs in preparing principals for effective leadership were located utilizing the following research databases: University of Arkansas Online Library, ERIC, SAGE, and Google Scholar. Keywords used in the initial search include school principal, principal preparation program, school leadership, and principal self-efficacy.

## **Review of Literature**

### **Historical Perspectives**

Most reformers and educators concur that school leaders have a crucial influence on student achievement. However, two of the most disputed subjects in education are how to adequately train school leaders for the 21st century and how to assess their effectiveness. Throughout the history of the principal's position, education reform has introduced laws that have redefined the role of the principal from a mere building manager and enforcer of discipline to a multifaceted position that involves strategic planning, financial management, legislative compliance, reform implementation, and enhancing student achievement (Pannell et al., 2015).

During the first half of the 20th century, structured educational leadership programs were developed to educate school principals. However, studies have indicated that these programs failed to keep pace with the changing nature of the principal's role (Hernandez et al., 2012; Kerston, 2010; Levine, 2005; Lynch, 2012; Miller, 2013; Zubnzycki, 2013). With increased demands for accountability placed on principals, preparation programs must modify their

approaches to effectively equip principals to handle the complexities of leadership in a 21st-century learning environment (Pannell et al., 2015).

### ***Principals' Roles***

Extensive research has been conducted to comprehend the role and responsibilities of a principal. The current study includes research comparing the historical roles and responsibilities of a principal to the current roles and responsibilities of a principal in terms of preparation requirements. The development of roles concerning the principal can be largely attributed to a combination of policy and academia (Murphy, 1992). Before the mid-1800s, schools were often one-room structures with a single leader who fulfilled both the roles of teacher and principal. With the shift towards multi-classroom buildings separated by age and ability, the principal's responsibilities became unclear. Newly appointed principals were expected to oversee multiple classrooms, discipline students, and manage courses with little or no training. The lack of a standardized system for professional development and job security was due to school districts' ability to set different requirements for principals (Pannell et al., 2015).

The need to formalize principal training was recognized by local communities and educational reformers in response to the ongoing evolution of principal roles during the early 20th century (Pannell et al., 2015). In the 1930s, the primary responsibilities of principals included enforcing compliance and overseeing day-to-day operations, which prompted an authority on public administration, Luther Gulick, to compile a list of expectations for organizational leadership and principals (Macmillan et al., 2001). This list, known as POSDCORB, stood for Planning, Organizing, Staffing, Directing, Co-ordinating, Reporting, and Budgeting, which encapsulated the duties of all leaders (Macmillan et al., 2001).



This conception of principalship remained unchanged for decades. Before the 1980s, the “effective schools era”, there was a lack of emphasis on the transformation of principals into instructional leaders (Portin et al., 2006). However, the 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk*, had a significant impact on the role of school leaders and their responsibility to ensure school improvement and effectiveness. During this time, the focus was on the characteristics of “effective schools,” and the replication of list-driven actions by school leaders became the expectation for the job. The primary goal of reform during this period was to establish the school as a unit of change (Portin et al., 2006). In the 1990s, a sequence of federal policy initiatives resulted in the “reform era,” which brought about significant changes to the role of principals. This shifted principals’ focus from leading schools to responding to reform to fix the nation’s lowest performing schools (Portin et al., 2006). As the “effective schools era” defined effective schools and called for reform in the 1980s and 1990s, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 ushered in the era of public accountability for student performance on high-stakes tests (NCLB, 2002).

Ongoing discussions about the evolution of principalship have taken place in the 21st century, with a shift from administrative management to instructional leadership due to the implementation of various education reform programs. According to research, instructional leadership is critical to school improvement, and principals must be capable of leading instructional change themselves or leading others who can do so. The position of principal has evolved to focus on enhancing learning through activities such as providing feedback on lessons, promoting teacher growth, and reducing chronic absenteeism (Gates et al., 2014; Kowal & Ableidinger, 2011; Portin et al., 2006). This change led to an increased emphasis on the need for excellent principal leadership as a strategy for building and maintaining effective schools. As a

result, formal school leaders must become self-efficacious in the knowledge and skills required to assume their added responsibilities (Ediger, 2014; Grissom & Bartanen, 2018; Hochbein & Cunningham, 2013; Manna, 2015). This transformation necessitated a change in how principals were prepared to lead schools effectively and improve student outcomes (Ediger, 2014; Rousmaniere, 2013).

### ***Education Reform***

The pivotal report *A Nation at Risk*, which was published in 1983, takes a closer look at education reform. In addition to conveying the message that education reform was essential, the report also delineated the need for it. The report was written as a response to the declining educational performance and the comparison of students in the United States to students from other countries. Concern about failing schools spread throughout all parties involved, including parents, the federal government, and state governments (Levine, 2005). As a result of the increased emphasis on effective leadership and student outcomes, there was also an increase in mandates for accountability and added pressures on schools to have capable leaders. This led to a widespread belief that if schools were not performing well, then the principals responsible for leading them were also at fault.

The education sector has undergone various reforms since the publication of the *A Nation at Risk* report. These reforms have had a significant impact on the sector (Kutash et al., 2010). Kutash et al. (2010) identified three key initiatives and highlighted their importance. The first initiative was the School Choice program, which aimed to provide students and parents with more autonomy over their educational choices. This initiative has been implemented continuously and has been adopted as part of the current turnaround model. The second initiative was the Charter School movement, which offers an alternative approach to education that is not

limited by traditional school systems. Charter schools have emerged as the leading solution for underperforming schools. The third initiative, the Small Schools Movement, focused on providing students with high needs with individualized learning opportunities. This initiative was based on research that showed the benefits of personalized learning on academic achievement (Kutash et al., 2010).

An increased emphasis on accountability was incorporated into the framework for leaders as the number of calls for state and local reform continued to mount (Onorato, 2013). This is a direct ramification of the efforts made to reform education by the No Child Left Behind Act. In 2001, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 was reauthorized as the "No Child Left Behind" (NCLB) legislation. NCLB mandated the administration of standardized exams to students across the country with a primary focus on accountability (Kutash et al., 2010). In addition to holding principals accountable for the success of their students, this act also aligned achievement among various subgroups, thus increasing the preparedness of students from disadvantaged backgrounds for either the workforce or college (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012). Thereafter, the authorization of the NCLB included the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 which led to further investigation into the expansion of accountability requirements (U.S. Department of Education [USDE], 2015). This authorization was accompanied by A Blueprint for Reform: The Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Act, or Race to the TOP (RTTT). With RTTT \$4.35 billion in federal funds were earmarked for competitive grant funding-specific initiatives (USDE, 2010).

The importance of a principal's role in the development of school reform that is necessary for student achievement was brought into further focus by the RTTT program (Davis et al., 2013). It is noteworthy that some states received funding totaling approximately \$17.5 million to

specifically increase the number of qualified principals necessary to turn around low-performing schools (Brown, 2015). The funding provided by RTTT was intended to encourage not only educational advancements but also the formation and maintenance of influential leaders (USDE, 2015). Specifically, Section (D) (4) of RTTT, "Great Teachers and Leaders, Improving the Effectiveness of Teacher and Principal Preparation," required states to expand preparation programs designed to produce effective principals, and to prepare principals to lead in identified shortage areas. Furthermore, states were required to provide a high-quality certification process (USDE, 2009).

In September 2011, an announcement was made, as per which the Elementary and Secondary Education Act would allow for flexibility waivers. This was yet another education reform measure. Over the course of its existence, the NCLB Act has been instrumental in prescribing accountability mandates. The ESEA provided flexibility waivers to state educational agencies to develop more comprehensive systems aimed at improving educational outcomes, increasing equity, and enhancing the quality of instruction. These waivers were designed to serve a variety of objectives, including the transformation of the nation's lowest-performing school (USDE, 2016). In particular, ESEA waivers were designed to empower states and districts to provide school leaders with the necessary support and training to facilitate instructional transformation in consonance with their visions for educational reform. These waivers prioritize four main reform initiatives, which also serve as the foundation for RTTT funding. These initiatives are as follows: 1) Formulating or adopting rigorous standards and evaluations, 2) constructing data systems that measure student growth and inform teachers and principals on how to make improvements to classroom instruction, 3) providing assistance for the professional development of educators and school leaders, and 4) rehabilitating schools with the poorest

academic outcomes through the application of various interventions and the provision of necessary resources (U.S. Department of Education, 2009, 2015, & 2016).

### *Professional Standards for Educational Leaders*

Over time, changes in education reform have resulted in changes in the roles and responsibilities of principals. In order to adequately prepare leaders for the challenges of today's schools, principal preparation programs should also evolve. Research over the past 30 years has demonstrated the importance of principal leadership and its positive correlation with student achievement. Given their essential role in closing the achievement gap between underserved and more affluent communities, principals must be well-prepared to lead their schools effectively (Espinoza & Cardichon, 2017). During the middle of the 1990s, the National Policy Board for Educational Administration developed what was known as the Interstate School Leaders License Consortium Standards (ISLLC). The purpose of establishing these criteria was to serve as a foundation for defining the knowledge and skills that an effective leader should possess. The primary goals of the consortium were to reshape preparation programs for school leaders and create standards that would guide the role of school principals (Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2013). Consequently, several states incorporated the ISLLC's licensing and accreditation policies into their systems (Pannell et al., 2015).

The ISLLC criteria were revised many times, particularly in 2008 and 2015, to reflect the changing nature of the work of the principal. The revision of the 2008 ISLLC standards was prompted by the belief that effective school leadership is directly correlated with improved student performance (NPBEA, 2015). The revisions made to the ISLLC standards demonstrated a change in the expectations for school leaders, with a focus on instructional leadership. ISLLC 2008 outlined the general functions of leaders to establish a vision for student success, create a

positive school culture, and effectively utilize teacher and administrator leadership to improve student achievement. The 2015 edition included a rebranding from ISLLC to Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSELs) as seen in Table 2. In addition, the revision highlighted the importance of interpersonal interactions in leadership, teaching, and student learning. This modification shifted the emphasis from academic rigor to student care and support (NPBEA, 2015).

**Table 3**

*The Professional Standards for Educational Leaders*

Standard 1. Mission, Vision, and Core Values – Effective educational leaders develop, advocate, and enact a shared mission, vision, and core values of high-quality education, academic success, and well-being of each student.
Standard 2. Ethics and Professional Norms – Effective educational leaders act ethically and according to professional norms to promote each student’s academic success and well-being.
Standard 3. Equity and Cultural Responsiveness – Effective educational leaders strive for equity of educational opportunity and culturally responsive practices to promote each student’s academic success and well-being.
Standard 4. Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment – Effective educational leaders develop and support intellectually rigorous and coherent systems of curriculum, instruction, and assessment to promote each student’s academic success and well-being.
Standard 5. Community of Care and Support for Students – Effective educational leaders cultivate an inclusive, caring, and supportive school community that promotes the academic success and well-being of each student.
Standard 6. Professional Capacity of School Personnel – Effective educational leaders develop the professional capacity and practice of school personnel to promote each student’s academic success and well-being.
Standard 7. Professional Community for Teachers and Staff – Effective educational leaders foster a professional community of teachers and other professional staff to promote each student’s academic success and well-being.
Standard 8. Meaningful Engagement of Families and Community – Effective educational leaders engage families and the community in meaningful, reciprocal, and mutually beneficial ways to promote each student’s academic success and well-being.
Standard 9. Operations and Management – Effective educational leaders manage school operations and resources to promote each student’s academic success and well-being.
Standard 10. School Improvement – Effective educational leaders act as agents of continuous improvement to promote each student’s academic success and well-being.

The PSELs expanded on the ISLLC framework by introducing additional measures to evaluate ethical behavior, cultural responsiveness, and instructional leadership. The new standards prioritize values and relationships, encouraging effective leadership that fosters community partnerships and teacher development. The Professional Standards for Educational Leaders encompass 10 standards: Standard 1. Mission, Vision, and Core Values, Standard 2. Ethics and Professional Norms, Standard 3. Equity and Cultural Responsiveness, Standard 4. Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment, Standard 5. Community of Care and Support for Students, Standard 6. Professional Capacity of School Personnel, Standard 7. Professional Community for Teachers and Staff, Standard 8. Meaningful Engagement of Families and Community, Standard 9. Operations and Management, and Standard 10. School Improvement (NPBEA, 2015).

According to the PSELs, school leaders are responsible for creating equitable and culturally responsive educational environments for all students, in addition to ensuring their academic success. Therefore, it is crucial to have high-quality PPPs to train effective school leaders (McKibben, 2013). The NPBEA designed the new standards to serve as a guide for PPPs, enabling colleges and institutions to identify and cultivate the particular knowledge and skill sets required for educational leaders in today's schools (Manna, 2015; NPBEA, 2015).

### **Needs and Challenges of Leading in Today's High-Needs Schools**

Research commissioned by The Wallace Foundation concluded that “leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school” (Leithwood et al., 2004, p.5). Strong principal leadership is crucial in every school organization. Principals have a direct impact on the school's successful performance. Principals shape the school's basic systems, climate, and resources that are designed to promote

student achievement (Jacobson, 2011). Perilla (2014) concluded successful leadership effects are multiplied in schools with high needs. The nation's lowest-performing schools serve minority students disproportionately. The study also found that principals' actions are attributed to 25% of the schools' impact on student achievement (Perilla, 2014). Prevalent research indicates common traits and actions of highly effective school leaders. Additional research considers the specific characteristics necessary for leaders of high-needs schools to affect improved outcomes.

A study conducted by Branch et al. (2013) provides evidence of the importance of quality school leadership on growth in student achievement. The findings suggest that competent principals are capable of increasing student achievement by two to seven months in a single academic year, while incompetent principals have an equally negative impact on student achievement. Unfortunately, there is a shortage of effective principals, particularly in schools serving disadvantaged students, and therefore, ineffective principals are not removed from their roles. To address the needs of these schools, it is essential to recruit and retain effective teachers through the implementation of strong leadership practices (Branch et al., 2013). Grissom and Lindsay (2021) have conducted a comprehensive review of two decades of research that demonstrates the positive influence of school leadership on student achievement, attendance, as well as teacher satisfaction, and retention.

According to Cohen (2015), school leaders of low-socioeconomic elementary schools with high-academic performance were more transformational than transactional in their leadership style. To attain educational objectives, these leaders collaborated with other team members and engaged in strategic planning. Effective principals regard themselves as constructors of school capability and architects of a risk-free and trustworthy environment. Apart from setting high expectations and sharing a vision, successful principals in high-needs schools



also explored ways to promote parental involvement (Cohen, 2015). While there is sufficient evidence linking effective leadership with student achievement, there is a lack of research on the differences between the behaviors, characteristics, and practices of effective leaders in high-needs schools compared to those who are struggling or not improving (Jacobson et al., 2007).

New Leaders for New Schools (2009) characterized principal effectiveness as the competence to improve student outcomes, build teacher capacity, and carry out effective leadership actions in the setting of high-poverty, high-performing schools. Through the Urban Excellence Framework, New Leaders for New Schools (2009) also identified the leadership actions that can provide the best outcomes. According to the concept, effective principals in schools serving low-income students must promote rigorous instruction. Effective principals must prioritize the hiring, development, and retention of highly skilled staff who share the school's mission. Additionally, they should establish a culture that values and promotes student success and implement systems to support learning. The framework also emphasizes the importance of principals serving as personal leadership role models for their low-income schools (New Leaders for New Schools, 2009).

Sebastian and Allensworth (2012) assert that a key determinant of student achievement and school change is the principal's leadership. According to the research conducted by Reeves (2003), effective principals in schools serving low-income students must have a laser-like concentration on academic accomplishment. Effective principals are selective in the curricular options they offer, encourage writing in the subject areas, and regularly evaluate their students' progress. Loeb et al. (2012) identified seven qualities that effective schools should have to guarantee high levels of student achievement: instructional leadership, a clearly defined mission, a secure, encouraging environment, high standards for all students, efficient monitoring of

student progress, increased learning opportunities, and a positive link between the school and the community. Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015) posit that high-performing, high-poverty schools showed a correlation between school atmosphere, student achievement, and a trusting connection with the principal. Effective teaching and high expectations are the characteristics that distinguish high-performing, high-poverty schools from low-performing, high-poverty schools, according to Parrett and Budge (2012).

Cheney and Davis (2011) argue that being a principal able to improve schools necessitates traits ingrained inside explicit beliefs. These convictions are linked to a sense of urgency, every student having untapped potential, high expectations, a sense of personal responsibility, and a value of diversity. According to *New Leaders for New Schools* (2009), effective principals must be resilient and persistent in order to overcome the difficulties they encounter on a daily basis. Highly effective principals in high-poverty schools, according to Ylimaki (2007), demonstrate enthusiasm, persistence, empathy, creative thinking, and flexibility.

Numerous studies have identified common practices among highly effective school leaders that lead to positive educational outcomes. These practices include building trust and utilizing multiple sources of information to solve challenges, maintaining a focus on teaching and learning through creating a shared vision, and being responsive to external demands (Holmes et al., 2013). Additionally, specific strategies have been identified as successful in high-poverty schools, such as establishing a clear school vision, providing resources and support for teachers, creating a collaborative environment, and effective school management (Finnigan & Stewart, 2009). Effective principals also prioritize teacher recruitment and retention, which has been shown to increase teacher job satisfaction and overall school capacity (Parylo & Zepeda, 2014).

According to Chenoweth and Theokas' (2013) research, good principals in high-poverty schools share four characteristics. Successful school leaders believe all students are capable of learning at a high level. They also prioritize the removal of any barriers that would prevent a teacher from focusing on instruction, such as a lack of resources or poor student behavior. In schools with high poverty levels, effective principals prioritize the professional development of staff and create a professional environment where faculty learn from each other on an ongoing and systematic basis. Additionally, effective leaders continuously monitor, evaluate, and reflect on progress toward achieving established goals (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2013). Concordantly, Fusarelli and Militello (2012) find educational leaders oversee selecting, retaining, and improving the instructional capacity of teachers. Students can achieve more and close achievement disparities with the help of effective teachers. Principals are also able to ensure the delivery of reliable, consistent, and efficient instruction, which will ultimately affect academic progress (Cheney & Davis, 2011).

Reinhorn et al. (2015) interviewed 142 teachers and principals in six high-performing, high-poverty schools. According to the findings of this study, teachers use data to inform their lessons, evaluate student achievement, and plan interventions accordingly. Ross (2013) discovered that effective principals in high-needs schools foster a climate of high expectations by actively tracking classroom instruction and individual students' development. Effective principals in schools serving low-income students know that developing teacher capacity is their primary duty to ensure high standards for student achievement (Miranda, 2011). Miranda (2011) found the school's culture was transformed by the principal who served as a facilitator of the teaching and learning process. As a result, the school is now self-sufficient and sustainable.

According to Kraft et al. (2015), teachers in high-poverty schools experience some level of uncertainty due to the frequent and unpredictably changing conditions in their impoverished communities, the demands of state accountability, and the consequences of poor performance. They discovered that many teachers were aware of the social and academic responsibilities of their position. In their study, effective instructors who choose to work with underprivileged pupils admired school administrators who are transparent when communicating with parents. To ensure that students are exposed to the curriculum coherently, Kraft et al. (2015) advised principals to support initiatives to align education across grade levels. Additionally, creating an organized and orderly environment throughout the school was found to be essential for the performance of competent instructors in schools with a high level of poverty. Principals were also advised to set up support structures for students who have emotional and behavioral problems. Finally, principals must encourage parents to have an active role in their students' education process to influence students' readiness to learn (Kraft et al., 2015).

### **Principal Preparation Programs**

Numerous studies have documented the significance of school principals for school performance in addition to the wide range of skills and knowledge principals require to meet the complex challenges of school leadership (e.g., Brown, 2016; Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Grissom et al., 2021; Herman et al., 2016; Orphanos & Orr, 2014; Portin et al., 2006). Principal preparation programs (PPPs) are the primary means of equipping new principals with the capabilities required to effectively lead schools. The principal's knowledge and skills in leadership are acquired and honed during the principal preparation process. A direct correlation has been established between the quality of the principal and the quality of the principal preparation program offered (Levine, 2005).

Studies have shown that more than 800 PPPs are operating in the United States (George W. Bush, 2016; Superville, 2017). These programs come in various forms, such as traditional university-based programs, innovative university-based programs, non-traditional alternate route programs, district-specific programs, and on-the-job experience programs. Although there are many alternative and nontraditional leadership programs available, around 95% of K-12 principals, or roughly 200,000 school leaders, were trained in a university-based program (McKibben, 2013; Superville, 2017).

Over a decade of research has revealed that university-based preparation programs continually fall short of the efficacy necessary to generate the school leaders our nation requires (The Wallace Foundation, 2016). For this reason, policymakers and scholars are examining and debating the efficiency of university leadership training programs. Arthur Levine (2005), the former president of Teachers College at Columbia University, conducted a landmark study indicating that many educational leaders were inadequately prepared due to the lack of rigor in university-based programs designed to impart training to principals. According to Levine (2005), the majority of PPPs ranged from inadequate to poor. This four-year investigation uncovered faults in the preparation process, including disorder in the curriculum, limited clinical education, and lax entrance requirements (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Levine, 2005; Superville, 2017).

According to Levine (2005), university-based PPPs have been criticized for not being closely aligned with the realities of the job. Despite extensive research demonstrating the positive impact of effective school leaders on student achievement, many university-based programs have not significantly changed their training approaches in the past decade (Superville, 2017). However, some programs have been developed as alternate or nontraditional options,

while others have been designed to improve upon traditional university-based programs by providing more relevant training for the specific contexts in which principals will be working. These efforts aim to bridge the gap between what is taught in traditional programs and the skills and knowledge that are necessary for effective school leadership (Prothero, 2017). According to Prothero (2017), "niche" principal training program innovations have diverse foci. For instance, maintaining an egalitarian climate in schools with diverse student and community populations is a potential challenge for formal school leaders, but traditional PPPs do not address the necessary skill set.

As per the perceptions of school district administrators, principals, and PPP representatives, university preparation programs are not adequately preparing principals to address the multifaceted challenges of school leadership (Manna, 2015). In 2016, the great majority of superintendents polled on this issue said that program enhancements were warranted (Davis, 2016). These district leaders ranked the degree of training for typical school leader abilities, such as recruiting and choosing teachers, as "less than effective." Over half of the principals questioned rated their programs as poor to fair in terms of educating them to manage diverse school environments and school policies (Davis, 2016). Levine (2005) specifically reported 89 percent of principals stated that their curriculum did not adequately prepare graduates for the reality of the classroom. Perhaps most shockingly, a considerable proportion, more than one-third, of PPP representatives concurred.

Bacon (2016) conducted a quantitative study to examine principals' perceptions of their PPPs' contributions to their overall improvement in skill level and knowledge relating to professional standards. Bacon's (2016) findings explain the strongest level of improvement was noted for organization management, likely due to the nature of the internship experiences within

the participants' school. When evaluated through the framework of experiential learning, this data indicates that respondents' perceptions of their own leadership preparation experiences were not inclusive of sufficient components of experiential learning in the key areas of visionary, ethical, and cultural leadership.

Nonetheless, additional evidence demonstrates that some educational leaders' programs have made significant strides in educating leaders for the demanding position of a principal (Davis et al., 2013). Programs that seek innovative measures or are tailored to address the demands of a leader in a turnaround dive deeper into more difficult subjects. The novel measures are distinguished by the clinical experience, selection criteria, and on-the-job support of the program (Davis et al., 2013).

Davis et al. (2012) performed a case study of five main preparation programs that gives comprehensive descriptions of essential characteristics to support suggestions for inclusion in leadership training. 1) Clear focus and learning of leadership attributes, 2) Curriculum focusing on instructional leadership, organizational development, and change management, 3) Field-based internships with skilled mentors, 4) Cohort model for collaboration and learning, 5) Intentional linking of theory and practice, 6) Rigorous selection process for candidates and faculty, and 7) Strong partnerships between university and district to support the candidate. Four areas of improvement in the development of leadership are confirmed by additional research: 1) Emphasis on instructional leadership, organizational culture, and analytical decision-making; 2) Authentic learning opportunities to put theory into practice; 3) Learning in supported cohort models; and 4) Creation of effective partnerships between training programs and school districts (Espinoza & Cardichon, 2017). Moreover, the research identifies five factors that promote successful leadership in schools. There is a need for a more rigorous admissions process for

candidates, additional pre-service training that includes more than building management, greater district participation in training leaders, better use of state authority to influence quality leadership development, and high-quality mentoring and training tailored to the individual and district needs (Mitgang, 2012).

When universities aim to modify their principal preparation program to meet the needs of their students and the education systems they intend to serve, they should understand the importance of various components such as faculty, partnerships, curriculum, pedagogy, and experiential learning opportunities provided to aspiring school leaders. Additionally, a comprehensive program should include structured mentorship and coaching, as well as addressing the complexities of culturally responsive leadership. Such a well-rounded approach can lead to deeper and more extensive reform efforts than what is required by the PSELs or through accreditation (Gray et al., 2020).

### **Perception of Readiness to Lead**

Although there has been some questioning about the effectiveness of PPPs, there has been a lack of comprehensive research in this area (Levine, 2005). Existing research that has attempted to evaluate the effectiveness of PPPs has mainly focused on specific school or population metrics, such as special education inclusive schools, English language learners, or technology integration. Other research has examined leadership qualities deemed effective in school leaders, including their ability to influence instructional leadership, improve school culture, and manage change.

The literature review for this study uncovered two quantitative studies that were conducted to examine principals' perceptions of their PPPs' contributions to their overall improvement in skill level and knowledge specifically relating to professional standards (Bacon,



2016; Hairston, 2020). In particular, Bacon (2016) found that participants reported the greatest improvement in skill associated with the professional standard of the organization's general management. He also concluded respondents' perceptions of their leadership preparation experiences did not include enough components of experiential learning in leadership areas proven necessary for successful school improvement. Eventually, it was surmised that PPPs lacked instructional strategies or internship experience related to improving skills and knowledge in the areas of visionary leadership, ethical leadership, and cultural leadership. He further reports that perceptions of mastery of subject-specific content were strong across areas addressed by the professional standards; however, the absence of practical experiences prevented the linkage of content knowledge with actionable skills in a school leadership setting (Bacon, 2016). According to the evidence found by Bacon (2016), PPPs focus experiential learning activities on the easier-to-accomplish tasks of management and instruction. As noted in the increased responsibilities of school leaders in the face of heightened accountability, these perceptions of readiness to lead may fall short in the school improvement efforts of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The findings of research designed by Hairston (2020) largely suggest favorable perceptions of preparedness to lead based on the PSELs. The study revealed the following findings: 1) school leaders perceived their program experiences to be aligned with the PSELs; 2) school leaders perceived that they were prepared for their administrative assignment following the completion of a PPP; 3) school leaders perceived that the program components were effective in preparing them for their administrative experience after completion of their PPP; and 4) school leaders perceived that they were satisfied with their program (p. 69).

## Theoretical Framework

### Self-Efficacy Theory

According to Bandura's (1977) Social Cognitive Theory, beliefs related to self-efficacy are an integral part of this theory. Self-efficacy has been an area of research interest since Bandura first introduced the concept more than four decades ago. Self-efficacy refers to an individual's confidence in their ability to successfully carry out the behaviors required to achieve desired outcomes. As a central construct of social cognitive theory, self-efficacy has a significant impact on the initiation, intensity, and persistence of behaviors in various contexts. Individuals with high levels of self-efficacy tend to take on more challenging tasks, apply more effort to accomplish them and demonstrate increased persistence when faced with obstacles (Bandura, 1977). Meta-analysis indicates that these behavioral characteristics are positively related to performance (Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998). Research also suggests that leaders with high self-efficacy achieve better individual performance results and have a greater ability to inspire followers to higher levels of collective efficacy and performance (Paglis, 2009).

Effective school principals are recognized as crucial to the success of a school, and without their leadership, attempts to improve student achievement are likely to be unsuccessful (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2007). The role of a school leader is demanding and multifaceted, requiring a broad range of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Principals' self-efficacy is inherently linked to their responsibility of working with and leading others. School leaders must create and sustain conditions that promote group performance to achieve shared goals (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2007).

The concept of self-efficacy for school principals involves an evaluation of their ability to design and implement a plan that leads to desired outcomes in their school context (Tschannen-

Moran & Gareis, 2007). The self-efficacy beliefs of the principal have a significant influence on their goal setting as a school leader, as well as their level of effort, adaptability, and persistence in carrying out their responsibilities (Bandura, 1997). Bandura (2000) explains that “when faced with obstacles, setbacks, and failures, those who doubt their capabilities slacken their efforts, give up, or settle for mediocre solutions. Those who have a strong belief in their capabilities redouble their efforts to master the challenge” (p. 120).

As it is a societal goal to produce a highly effective leadership pool of principals, a larger and more diverse population must be given leadership experiences. It is also essential to ensure that emerging leaders know leadership can be developed and that it is likely to involve successes and failures in the process (Murphy & Johnson, 2016). In this regard, Bandura’s theoretical work on the sources of self-efficacy may serve as the basis for efforts for augmenting self-efficacy for school leaders (Paglis, 2009). As mentioned in Chapter 1, Table 1, individuals consider four types of information in making judgments of their self-efficacy. The first one is personal mastery experiences. Individuals reflect on their past successes and failures to determine their capabilities in performance. The second type of information is vicarious experience from observing successful model performances which positively affects the observer’s perceptions of their abilities to perform. The third source is external verbal persuasion, which includes positive performance expectations, support to persist, and verbal forms of motivation and encouragement. Lastly, individuals assess their self-efficacy in relation to their physiological state at the time. If levels of high stress and anxiety are experienced, they may judge this to predict failure which diminishes efficacy perceptions (Paglis, 2009).

Research indicates that cultivating self-efficacy is crucial to improving the effectiveness of school principals. Goddard et al. (2017) found a correlation between student achievement and

principal self-efficacy, with schools that had high levels of collective teacher efficacy attributing their success to principals who provided opportunities for collaboration on instructional improvement. Additionally, Federici and Skaalvik (2011) discovered a positive association between principal self-efficacy and enthusiasm and commitment to their work. Further research suggests that principal self-efficacy is linked to their instructional leadership skills and their ability to positively influence teacher attitudes and behaviors, resulting in higher levels of collective teacher efficacy (Hallinger et al., 2018).

Though a principal's self-efficacy is complex and developed through their unique experiences and contexts, research indicates self-efficacy can be enhanced through the inclusion of specific practices in a PPP (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2007; Versland, 2016). Versland (2016) suggested that PPPs can better promote the development of self-efficacy by incorporating elements that align with Bandura's (1986) four sources of efficacy beliefs. These include mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and the promotion of positive psychological states. It is further contended that activities should be designed with these sources in mind while continuing to focus on relationship building. Extended time for substantial internships will allow participants to engage in authentic activities related to school improvement, requiring them to work with others to solve real problems. Extended internships should also provide principals with sufficient time to implement their knowledge and skills in their school settings. Participants will learn vicariously from cohort members about what is successful and what needs adaptation. The rigor of programming in PPPs should provide opportunities to help participants develop the psychological responses they will need to tackle the impediments they will confront as principals. Extensive support given during the internship

and the rigors of the PPP will contribute to the beliefs of self-efficacy with verbal persuasion to overcome and persist (Versland, 2016).

Garcia-Valesquez (2019) posits that principals who have a high level of self-efficacy are better able to overcome challenges and perform at greater levels in the setting of high-poverty schools. Meanwhile, principal self-efficacy views are influenced by individual traits, readiness to develop teacher capacity, high expectations, and a firm belief in children despite their socioeconomic problems (Sullivan, 2013). Being critical in the development of the IMPACT Arkansas Fellowship, the concept of leadership self-efficacy is essential to understanding the implications of this study.

### **Summary**

The reviewed literature illuminates a historical perspective on the role of principals and the professional standards that measure the effectiveness of a principal in conjunction to education reform initiatives. The literature promulgates that highly effective leaders of schools are second only to teachers for a positive effect on school outcomes and that there are design elements of PPPs to best develop leaders to assume these roles. Domains to consider in PPPs include: 1) Research-based curricula, 2) Cohort model, 3) Partnerships between universities and districts, 4) Opportunity to put theory into practice with hands-on internships, and 5) Rigorous selection processes for candidates and faculty. Furthermore, individualized training and support based on the context of the school can enhance future leadership abilities. Self-efficacy, defined as one's belief in their ability to perform effectively in a given circumstance, is an essential factor in leadership readiness. Although research suggests how PPPs can develop self-efficacy in leaders, there is little evidence of the implementation of these practices. Accumulated research indicates an inconsistency in the development or revisions of PPPs nationwide.

## **Chapter 3 Research Design**

### **Introduction**

This qualitative research study is designed to explore how recent graduates perceived the IMPACT Arkansas Fellowship program prepared them for the complexities associated with school leadership and levels of self-efficacy associated with effective leadership knowledge and skills application. More specifically, the study aims to provide insights into the relationship between components of the IMPACT PPP and participants' beliefs of self-efficacy by exploring graduates' perceptions of their principal preparation experiences. Additionally, the study seeks to gain deeper insight into the PPP characteristics that prepare educational leaders for success during their first years as novice administrators.

This chapter elucidates the study's design and methodology. In addition, it provides details as to how they support the purpose of the study. The use of interviews facilitates a deeper understanding of how recent graduates from IMPACT PPP perceived their readiness to effectively lead their school to success. The chapter will also delineate the research sample and questions. The following section discusses the research plan, which includes the methods for data collection, analysis, and synthesis, as well as the ethical considerations, trustworthiness, and limitations of the study.

### **Rationale for Methodology**

#### **Research Purpose**

This dissertation adopts a qualitative case study approach, utilizing semi-structured interviews to examine recent graduates' perceptions of the IMPACT Arkansas Fellowship program's effectiveness in preparing them for the challenges of school leadership. Specifically, this investigation aims to explore how recent graduates conceptualize their self-efficacy as

novice leaders. In accordance with Maxwell's (2013) assertion that research questions play a pivotal role in defining a study's purpose, this research endeavors to address the following research questions as the core of its focus.

1. How did IMPACT Arkansas Fellowship graduates perceive leadership pre-service experiences prepare them to assume a school leader role?
2. What specific pre-service experiences were perceived as beneficial to novice leaders?
3. How relevant were the pre-service experiences to the graduate's high-poverty school community?
4. Did the pre-service experiences influence graduates' confidence in their ability to carry out necessary leadership behaviors and actions to achieve desired results?
5. What additional pre-service experiences would help prepare future graduates, and how would they be beneficial to novice leaders?

### **Research Approach**

This research is a qualitative case study that examines multiple novice school leaders' perceptions of their preparedness to lead owing to the IMPACT Arkansas Fellowship experiences. Exploring through the lens of multiple recent graduates makes this a multiple-case study. A case study allows for a specific study on a bounded system, the IMPACT Arkansas Fellowship. Because it is a bounded system, contextual, and a process study, this research is ideally suited for a case study design (Merriam, 2009). Case study, as defined by Creswell (2002) and Stake (2000), denotes the study of a "bounded system" (p. 436). According to Creswell (2002), "Bounded indicates that the case is separated for research purposes in terms of time, location, or some physical boundaries" (p. 485). Put differently, it is possible to establish boundaries around the subject of study (Merriam, 2009). A case may be an individual, a group, a

school, or a community (Merriam, 2009), or "a program, events, or activities" (Creswell, 2002, p. 485). This research approach is consistent with the research philosophy of constructivism, which considers reality to be shaped by the different perspectives of research participants. By utilizing this approach, the research questions are aligned with the investigation of how completing a particular PPP, such as the IMPACT Arkansas Fellowship program, shapes the perceptions and experiences of recent graduates as they enter into school leadership roles.

Certain knowledge and reality assumptions should be established for each research approach in order to direct one's study (Crotty, 1998). Three knowledge and reality assumptions were made in this case study to help guide the investigation. The assumptions that were made in this qualitative investigation include: 1. Variables are complex and intertwined, 2. Reality is socially constructed, and 3. Consciousness is an intentional activity that aids in the construction of human understanding of the world (Crotty, 1998; Glesne, 2006).

A qualitative case study should possess specific characteristics that include being particularistic, heuristic, inductive, and descriptive (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013; Stake, 1995). The particularistic feature pertains to a specific situation, event, or program, and in this study, the focus is on the IMPACT Arkansas Fellowship. The heuristic aspect ensures that the reader comprehends the phenomena outlined in the case study. The literature review explains that while the responsibilities of principals are increasing, there is limited evidence that PPPs have improved to develop successful leaders for the complex needs of 21st-century schools. The inductive characteristic analyzes emerging patterns, themes, and concepts derived from data analysis. The descriptive characteristic is met with thick and rich descriptions of the phenomenon at the center of the study.



### **The Research Sample**

The primary purpose of this investigation is to investigate the perceptions of recent graduates regarding the effectiveness of the IMPACT Arkansas Fellowship pre-service program in preparing them for the complexities of school leadership in the 21st century. To ensure the success of the qualitative research, it is imperative to carefully select participants who can offer detailed and relevant accounts of their experiences. The study seeks to gather in-depth insights into the unique emphasis of the program (Creswell, 2013).

Participants in a qualitative study should not be chosen at random but rather with the intention of bringing value and knowledge to the investigation (Maxwell, 2013). This study will incorporate purposeful sampling to select participants meeting the criteria. It employs a criterion sampling strategy to select participants that meet predetermined criteria (Palinkas et al., 2015). The predetermined criteria for participant selection will include: 1) serving as a formal school leader in a K-12 public or public charter school in Arkansas, 2) holding a principal license from the Arkansas Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 3) having five or fewer years of experience as a school administrator, and 4) graduated from IMPACT Arkansas Fellowship principal preparation program.

When determining the sample size to include in the study, due consideration should be given to the level and breadth of the study the researcher intends to achieve. Maxwell (2013) emphasizes the importance of reaching data saturation, which occurs when no new themes or insights are emerging from the data. He suggests that researchers should continue collecting data until saturation is reached, regardless of the number of participants involved in the study (Maxwell, 2013). He indicates five possible goals for purposeful selection including: 1) achieve the representativeness of the individuals selected, 2) adequately capture the heterogeneity in the

population, 3) deliberately select individuals that are critical for testing theories of the study, 4) establish particular comparisons to illuminate the reasons or differences between individuals, and 5) select participants that will best answer the research questions.

### **Overview of Research Design**

There are variations in terms of how scholars define a case study. To illustrate, some researchers view case studies as the subject of study (Stake, 2000), whereas others view it as an investigative method (Creswell, 2002). A case study, according to Creswell, is "an in-depth examination of a bounded system (e.g., an activity, an event, a process, or an individual) based on extensive data collection" (p. 485). According to Creswell, if the focus of the research is to develop an extensive comprehension of a specific case or bounded system that includes an event, process, activity, or one or more individuals, then a case study research method is recommended (p. 496). Furthermore, Patton (1999) emphasizes that case studies can provide a holistic understanding of particular situations, problems, or individuals.

Creswell and Poth (2018) characterize case study methodology as a type of design in qualitative research that may be an object of study or the product of inquiry. In the present study, bounded cases relate to how recent graduates (individuals) perceived the IMPACT Arkansas Fellowship pre-service experiences prepared them for the complexities associated with leading K-12 public and public charter schools. The IMPACT Arkansas Fellowship program is a bounded system. Multiple units of inquiry or cases, novice school leaders, will be used to determine the prevalence and frequency of particular issues (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this case study, the product of inquiry will result in building "patterns" or "explanations" through a cross-case analysis of the respondents' answers to semi-structured interviews (Yin, 2014). A cross-case

analysis will compare, contrast, and synthesize perspectives regarding the same issue (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Data Collection Methods**

Bearman (2019b) defines qualitative research as a systematic approach to studying social phenomena by qualifying, describing, illuminating, explaining, and investigating the object of study. To gain insights into the human experience, qualitative researchers often rely on the interpretations and subjective experiences of others. One common data collection method used in qualitative research is interviews (Bearman, 2019a). In this study, the researcher will conduct semi-structured interviews to gather informative accounts from novice school leaders about their preparedness to lead as a result of their experiences with the IMPACT Arkansas Fellowship. The semi-structured interview approach allows for flexibility in the questions to seek clarification or further inquiry related to the research topic (Guest et al., 2013). The goal is to gather thick and rich experiential data rather than just opinions. By focusing on experiences, the data can include reconstructed facts and descriptions of the social meanings attached. The open-ended prompts in the semi-structured interviews aim to generate heuristic and complex thoughts and descriptions of the experiences with a valence (Bearman, 2019a).

The interview protocol (Appendix B) will be piloted with members of the first and second cohort alumni from the IMPACT program. This group of participants mirrors the target population and will provide valuable feedback regarding the validity and potential need for revisions to the interview protocol. The pilot interviews will be recorded and analyzed to identify areas that require clarification or significant modification. Conducting a pilot study of the interview protocol is a strategy to enhance the trustworthiness and reliability of the instrument.

### **Procedures for Recruitment and Data Collection**

The researcher will draft an email that will be sent to all known graduates of IMPACT currently serving in formal leadership roles in Arkansas K-12 public or public charter schools. The email will provide an overview of the study and solicit graduates' participation. The participants will be asked to answer a series of questions about their current position, years of experience as a formal leader, school location, and student demographics. After the responses are received from interested graduates, the researcher will then utilize purposeful sampling to select participants.

The researcher will use individual semi-structured interviews as a means of allowing respondents to describe their lived experiences and to give the interviewer the flexibility to make decisions on the significance of the responses (Bearman, 2019a). The interviews will be conducted remotely via the Zoom platform and are anticipated to last for about 45 minutes to an hour. Before commencing the interview, the researcher will review the informed consent letter (Appendix A) with each participant. If they consent, the interview will proceed using the interview protocol (Appendix B).

The interviews will be recorded via the Zoom platform, transcribed, and compared to the original recordings to ensure accuracy. Participants will be given the opportunity to review the transcripts to ensure the accuracy of the information presented. This approach will enhance the trustworthiness of the qualitative study.

### **Methods for Analysis and Synthesis**

The study will utilize a general inductive approach to uncover significant themes from the raw data (Thomas, 2006). This method is goal-free and aims to describe the actual effects of the program instead of just the planned effects. The transcripts will be systematically reviewed to

identify major themes, and segments of the interview text will be coded to analyze responses related to specific themes. The relationships between themes will also be examined, and the significance of themes to the participants will be identified. This approach ensures a rigorous and systematic analysis of the data (Scriven, 1991). The researcher will do this by specifically following Bloomberg and Volpe's (2019) four steps of qualitative data analysis: 1. review the data and reflect on the overall meaning, 2. reread and code the data, and organize it into categories, 3. determine and summarize key findings with participant quotations as support for representation in chapter four, and 4. analyze and synthesis findings by linking to research, insights, and experiences for inclusion in chapter five.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Even though ethics are embedded in all aspects of research, four areas of this study stand out as needing special attention. The first two address the researcher's obligation to safeguard participants' rights and welfare using techniques common to qualitative research, such as maintaining confidentiality and obtaining participants' informed agreement. Researchers have a responsibility to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of study participants. Disclosing identifying information can lead to potential harm, such as breach of confidentiality, violation of privacy, or harm to reputation. Therefore, researchers must take the necessary precautions to ensure that any identifying information is kept confidential and secure throughout the research process. One way to maintain anonymity is by assigning numbers or aliases to individuals, as recommended by Creswell and Poth (2018). It is also important to avoid disclosing any identifying information about the participants' communities, schools, or workplaces to protect their privacy. Referencing a participant, school, or community will be done with pseudonyms.

In addition to providing informed consent forms (Appendix A), the researcher will ensure that every member of the target community is aware of the goals, applications, and procedures of the study to protect their rights and maintain ethical standards (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2019). This includes explaining any potential risks and benefits, ensuring confidentiality, and providing a clear understanding of how the results will be used. It is also essential for the researcher to avoid misrepresenting the nature or objectives of the study, as Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasize the importance of ethical behavior in research.

The data collection procedures are made clear to reassure readers of their reliability. In addition, interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed to ensure accuracy in the data collection process. "First-level member checks" (p. 201) were proposed by Brantlinger et al. (2005) as a technique to determine data reliability. Interview transcripts will be sent to interviewees for review in order to verify accuracy and intent.

An ethical factor that was particularly relevant to this investigation was faith in the researcher's interpretation. Due to the researcher's involvement in the research sample group's IMPACT Arkansas Fellowship experience, careful bracketing will be required to determine the construction of meaning from the participants' perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In qualitative research, bracketing refers to the process of setting aside preconceived notions or biases that the researcher may have about the topic or participants to approach the research with an open and unbiased perspective. Creswell and Poth (2018) refer to bracketing as the process of setting aside personal biases and assumptions in order to view the data objectively and to prevent personal values from influencing the interpretation of data. When making decisions about data collecting, analysis, and reporting, the researcher's personal values, and experiences are always taken into consideration. According to Bott (2010), "Researchers must constantly locate and

relocate themselves inside their work and remain in dialogue with research practice, participants, and methodology" in order to sustain reflexivity (p. 160).

The researcher is committed to ethically conducting qualitative research by following strict ethical standards throughout the process of data collection, preservation, analysis, interpretation, and reporting. To ensure the reader comprehends the extent of ethical consideration, the researcher will explicitly address various ethical concerns, including measures to maintain confidentiality, obtaining informed consent, ensuring the reliability of data collection, and ensuring confidence in the bracketing of personal interpretation.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) assert that a research study's value and veracity are related. Establishing the study's credibility and applicability to other situations is necessary to establish its trustworthiness. In this study, reliability will be determined by utilizing different data sources to create a deep, thorough, and well-developed picture of novice school leaders' perceptions of preparedness to lead, a practice known as triangulation. Triangulation is the process of using several techniques or data sources in qualitative research to create a thorough understanding of a phenomenon (Patton, 1999). In qualitative research, triangulation is a technique used to enhance validity by comparing data from multiple sources. In this study, triangulation will be achieved by examining the consistency of data from different sources within the same data collection method to ensure the validity and reliability of the research findings.

Validity will also be ensured via member checking. Sharing emergent themes from early analysis of interviews with the interview subjects is member checking (Merriam, 2009). According to Hill and colleagues (2005), one approach to promoting the credibility and trustworthiness of qualitative research is to allow participants to review and provide feedback on

the analysis. In this study, all participants will be invited to review the analysis to ensure accuracy and provide an opportunity to reframe or clarify their perspectives (Hill et al., 2005). This process is consistent with the concept of member checking, which involves seeking feedback from participants to enhance the credibility and confirmability of qualitative research findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Using member checks ensures the accuracy of the transcription and serves to validate the authenticity of information gathered during the interviews. In addition, member verification helps detect personal bias and misunderstanding on the part of the researcher (Maxwell, 2013).

The researcher serves as an instrument for gathering and analyzing data when conducting a qualitative study. According to Rossman and Rallis (2003), the competence with which qualitative research is conducted and the researcher's ethical behavior determine the reliability of the results. Consumer confidence in the competent and ethical conduct of this qualitative study should be boosted by open communication with research participants, peer debriefings, and a dissertation committee inquiry.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

The data collected for this study has limitations and delimitations in revealing the full story of the IMPACT Arkansas Fellowship's influence. This study only focuses on the perceptions of a small number of participants regarding the program's influence on their preparedness to lead. Self-reported information will be a part of semi-structured interviews that are conducted one-on-one. Among the participants will be members completing IMPACT in different years. This inherently creates variances in experiences considering each year had different cohort members and some years involved different IMPACT staff. Possible variations of program delivery exist as development and adjustments are made to the program consistently.



COVID-19 has altered education in a myriad of ways, and depending on when the graduates participated in IMPACT or took on leadership roles in schools, their perceptions of effectiveness may be affected. Additionally, the researcher's involvement in data gathering as the primary medium could lead to bias due to personal relationships existing or being absent and previous experiences with the graduates. Ultimately human biases and viewpoints will still affect the research and interpretation of findings (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

This qualitative study will entail the participation of only those Arkansas school leaders in leadership positions who have completed the IMPACT Arkansas Fellowship PPP and have five years or less of administrative experience. The recorded perceptions of the respondents serve as the final set of data. There are alternative sources of data and analysis that could be used in future research. Other sources of data such as student success trends and opinions of the school community already exist or could be compiled for further examination.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the success of the Impact program from the perspective of recent graduates who are serving as novice administrators in K-12 public and public charter schools. Specifically, the study aims to examine how the IMPACT curriculum and pre-service experiences have contributed to the graduates' success as school administrators. The research will involve a multi-case study design that will focus on the perceptions of six graduates. The study questions were presented at the beginning of the chapter, followed by a summary of the research design and methods. Ethical and trustworthiness considerations were also addressed before concluding with a discussion of the research's limitations.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Informed Consent Letter

June 2023

Dear Participant:

As a doctoral candidate at the University of Arkansas, I am in the process of conducting a study entitled *Readiness to Lead: Novice School Leaders' Perceptions of the IMPACT Arkansas Fellowship Experience on Their Preparedness to Assume School Leadership Roles*. My study is seeking to primarily answer research questions related to principal self-efficacy development and the relationship to principal preparation experiences. The primary method for data collection is semi-structured individual interviews. Each interview is scheduled to last approximately forty-five to sixty minutes. The interviews will be conducted and recorded via zoom and professionally transcribed.

Your participation in this qualitative study will assist me in adding knowledge to the field regarding principal self-efficacy and preparation for aspiring school leaders. The data obtained from this study will be useful to the IMPACT Arkansas Fellowship team with the University of Arkansas as they continue to review and revise the experiences of the program associated leadership preparation. Although your participation will help us to better understand school leaders' self- efficacy and principal preparation, this study will not benefit you personally.

Your participation is completely voluntary. If you wish to decline to answer certain questions or withdraw from the study at any time, you may do so without prejudice or penalty, and the information up to that point will be destroyed upon request. Because your interview responses will be confidential and stored in a secure location, there are no risks. You will not be identified in any reports or publications related to the study; a pseudonym will be used. Should I need additional information or clarification, I will contact you via email. You may email your response to me. The results will be analyzed in terms of themes and patterns. Summaries of the information from all participants will be included in the final chapters of the dissertation.

I look forward to your participation in this study, as your interview responses are extremely important to the research. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions or concerns. Your time and effort with this study are greatly appreciated!  
Respectfully,

Allison Prewitt  
Doctoral Candidate  
University of Arkansas

**AUTHORIZATION: I have read the above and understand the discomforts, inconvenience, and risk of this study. I agree to participate in this research. I understand that I may withdraw from the study at any time. I have received a copy of this informed consent letter for my own records.**

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Participant Name (PRINT)

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Participant Signature

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Date

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Investigator Name (PRINT)

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Investigator Signature

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Date

## **Appendix B: Interview Protocol**

### **Perceptions of Preparedness to Lead as a Result of IMPACT Arkansas Fellowship Experiences**

Please think back to your IMPACT Arkansas Fellowship principal preparation program (IMPACT) as you answer and elaborate on these questions:

1. What do you believe is required of a school leader in high-poverty schools?
2. How confident were you of your leadership ability before IMPACT?
3. Which specific IMPACT experiences do you believe were most relevant to your leadership development? Please elaborate.
4. How would you describe the personal interactions you had with IMPACT faculty and staff as they relate to your leadership development?
5. How did interactions with other IMPACT fellows inform your leadership development experience?
6. How were you challenged during the IMPACT program?
7. How prepared to lead your high-poverty school did you feel after completing the IMPACT program?
8. Describe an example from your practice that illustrates your confidence as a school leader?
9. What experiences would you suggest IMPACT include in their programming to support successful transitions from coursework to application?