THE MODERN AP: CULTIVATING INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP AMONG ASSISTANT PRINCIPALS

A disquisition presented to the faculty of the Graduate School of
Western Carolina University in partial fulfillment of the
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DEDICATION

Thank you to my family for their support over these last 3 years. The time and dedication it took to complete this degree would have not happened without you.

—Katelyn

To my family, may the legacy of love, kindness, and service you have built continue through Madelyn, Avalyn, and Emerlyn.

—John

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DISQUISITION OVERVIEW

The structure of Western Carolina University's EdD Program in Educational Leadership is influenced strongly by the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (n.d.). Individuals in this executive doctoral program, known as *scholar-practitioners*, are prepared to be organizational leaders by solving problems of practice. Scholar-practitioners complete culminating research projects called disquisitions instead of traditional dissertations. A disquisition is a formal treatise aimed at producing improved outcomes for a community of practice by introducing new knowledge that solves problems in that community. According to the Western Carolina University program handbook for scholar-practitioners, "The Ed.D. Disquisition experience embodies the four qualities articulated by Archbald (2010): (1) developmental efficacy, (2) community benefit, (3) intellectual stewardship, and (4) form and function distinctiveness" (Western Carolina University, 2020, p. 16). Scholar-practitioners are encouraged to work together to promote a collaborative approach to solving problems of practice.

Scholar-Practitioner Backgrounds

This disquisition reflects the work of two scholar-practitioners. John McDaris is a public educator with 12 years of experience as a teacher, assistant principal, and principal in the state of North Carolina. Having grown up in a small western North Carolina town, he became convinced at an early age that public education was a critical driver for the existence of a great nation. John earned a North Carolina Teaching Fellows Scholarship and completed his undergraduate degree at Western Carolina University before becoming a teacher and multisport coach at a public 9–12 high school. Several years later, John

earned his Master of School Administration from Western Carolina University and transitioned into an assistant principal and athletic director position at another public 9–12 high school. John is currently serving as the principal of a public middle school in western North Carolina.

Katelyn Davis is a public educator with 15 years of experience in public education across three southern states. Katelyn earned her undergraduate degree at Elon University and went on to teach in a 9–12 public high school in upstate South Carolina. Katelyn completed her Master of School Administration at Furman University and has garnered administrative experience in South Carolina, Georgia, and North Carolina. Currently, Katelyn is serving as a middle school principal in western North Carolina.

Research Question Development

The idea for this research began when the scholar-practitioners were working together as assistant principals. Though they both experienced strong student success as classroom teachers, neither felt prepared to lead instruction in their schools as assistant principals, despite sharing an equal instructional leadership responsibility with their principal. After several conversations with assistant principals both in and outside their district, they realized instructional leadership preparation was nonexistent. Following this realization, the scholar-practitioners began discussing how to mitigate the deficit in assistant principal preparedness for instructional leadership.

Both scholar-practitioners believe high-quality instructional preparedness by teachers and assistant principals yields superior learning opportunities for students. While he was teaching, John experienced instructional growth because of the honest and frequent constructive feedback of his supervising administrators. He saw how the

feedback transformed his practice and benefitted his students. Upon stepping into an assistant principal role, John realized there was no formal guidance about how to impact his teaching staff similarly, other than learning through experience on the job. In his opinion, this was an unacceptable solution and a disservice to students and teachers.

Katelyn did not receive instructional guidance or mentorship during her years as a teacher. It was not until she began her first job as an administrator when she experienced frequent constructive feedback and mentorship that led to her instructional growth.

The scholar-practitioners began their formal research journey upon acceptance into Western Carolina University's EdD Program in Educational Leadership while still serving as assistant principals. This research represents the first step in their endeavor to produce exceptional outcomes for all teachers and all students in all contexts by cultivating the instructional leadership of assistant principals.

ABSTRACT

THE MODERN AP: CULTIVATING INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP AMONG ASSISTANT PRINCIPALS

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Western Carolina University (March 2022)

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Assistant principals exist in most school contexts and, although instructional leadership has been a frequent topic of educational research, most studies have focused specifically on the role of principals. The present improvement initiative analyzed the instructional leadership capacity of assistant principals and the impact of targeted professional development on assistant principals' instructional leadership capacity. Assistant principals were asked to participate in a 6-week, all-virtual professional development series emphasizing high-impact instructional strategies based on John Hattie's (2009) work. Assistant principal participant feedback and survey data were analyzed using a mixed-methods approach. Findings indicated assistant principals view instructional leadership as an important function of their role yet struggle to find time to address the instructional needs associated with that role. Additionally, assistant principals experienced increased confidence and frequency of engagement in instructional leadership activities after participating in professional development focused on actionable learning that can be implemented immediately as part of their professional practice. This

study provides guidance for school districts seeking to implement professional development activities, including how school districts can use existing expertise from district leaders to improve the instructional leadership capacity of their assistant principals.

Keywords: assistant principals, instructional leadership, professional development, instructional influences

The Modern AP: Cultivating Instructional Leadership Among Assistant Principals

The leadership potential of assistant principals should not be understated. In an era of increasing expectations and accountability, individuals serving in assistant principal roles must be dynamic and able to lead in tandem with their principals. They can no longer simply be viewed as the barons of books, buses, and butts (Celikten, 2001; Gurley et al., 2015; Hilliard & Newsome, 2013). Unfortunately, assistant principals are not currently prepared to meaningfully lead instruction in their schools despite their potential to do so effectively. In addition to handling managerial tasks most commonly associated with their position, the modern assistant principal must effectively implement plans aligned with the missions and visions of their school and district, lead teachers, improve instruction, build relationships both in and outside of their schools, understand and articulate accountability data, handle the social–emotional challenges faced by their students and staff, and make a litany of other critical decisions. Prioritizing these complex demands can be difficult, even with proper professional development.

Assistant principals have a long history in public education. They first entered the scene of education during the 1930s following the growth of public schools in urban areas (Glanz, 2004). The intention behind the creation of the assistant principal position was to have a second administrator tasked with managerial responsibilities such as buses, textbooks, and student discipline (Celikten, 2001; Gurley et al., 2015; Hilliard & Newsome, 2013). Despite substantial changes to the roles and responsibilities of schools in the following decades, the function and expectations of assistant principals changed minimally.

In 2002, the introduction of No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top legislation resulted in a considerable increase in demands placed on schools and educational leaders, specifically regarding instructional outcomes. The more recent Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015), a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, 1965), has kept instructional accountability as a top priority. The complexity of this priority has been compounded with additional indicators of success such as student and school growth, graduation rates, and testing participation requirements for students in all racial, gender, and socioeconomic groups (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2018). Each shift moves away from the historic premium placed on managerial leadership and requires school leaders—especially assistant principals—to be more instructionally competent and dynamic than ever.

Problem of Practice

Although one might assume assistant principals are now poised to serve a diverse array of complex needs, in the modern era, the role of assistant principals remains ill defined and is often determined by each school's principal (Houchens et al., 2018). Schools are increasingly complex institutions with evolving demands. The increasing complexity was especially palpable during the COVID-19 global pandemic, when there were innumerable disruptions to what was considered "normal" in all school settings (Bagwell, 2020). The global pandemic required school leaders to demonstrate flexibility and instructional leadership in ways never imagined previously. Regionally and nationwide, school districts are expected to provide more accountability, better serve students' mental health needs, keep students and staff safe, and comply with state and district mandates in addition to various other demands placed on schools. These demands

are usually not coupled with increased staff, requiring school administrators to be more dynamic than ever while effectively leading the most fundamental component of their schools—instruction. Despite the lack of clear assistant principal job descriptions, which leads many principals to relegate their assistant principals to managerial tasks, Celikten (2001) contended instructional leadership ought to be considered a primary responsibility of assistant principals. The modern assistant principal can play a much more critical role in schools regarding instructional leadership, but preparation is key and currently lacking (Augustine et al., 2009).

Due to the complexity of the assistant principal role, individuals are expected to enter the position with leadership capacity in a variety of areas. However, many assistant principals move into their roles from classroom teaching positions and are rarely trained on how to translate their own classroom success into instructional gains for other teachers as an administrator (Mercer, 2016). Others become assistant principals because of their competence for traditional managerial leadership tasks but are challenged by instructional responsibilities that require them to provide meaningful leadership for teachers and students in age groups and content areas outside of their professional experience and training. Neither pathway offers new assistant principals a foundation for successful instructional leadership.

Administrators in the modern era of education should be expected to competently lead instruction because of the positive effects administrative instructional leadership can have on schools (Boyce & Bowers, 2018). Assistant principals' ability to engage in meaningful actions and conversations that can advance the quality of teaching and learning in schools is too often assumed (Hilliard & Newsome, 2013). These assumptions

potentially inhibit the quality of outcomes for teachers and the students they serve, which is concerning. Assistant principals impact instruction in their schools, for better or worse, and assuming their ability to lead instruction is ill advised. In an era when administrators' abilities to lead instruction is crucial to the success of their schools, more attention must be paid to the recruitment, cultivation, and development of instructional leadership among assistant principals (Whitaker & Vogel, 2005). Therein lies the problem of practice for this research: Assistant principals are not prepared to lead instruction in schools, which presents a missed opportunity for schools and districts to improve teacher capacity and student outcomes.

Educational leaders should consider ways to invest in developing assistant principal instructional leadership capacity. Investing in the development of assistant principals can have benefits in both the short and long term (Gurley et al., 2015). Assistant principals are often apprentices learning to become principals of their own schools, but they have immediate leadership potential, especially in regard to instruction. Many districts lack in-house leadership development programs for assistant principals, which means the depth and quality of assistant principal training is subject to the varying abilities and dispositions of principals; unfortunately, principals are also unlikely to have received any substantial preparation for the diverse and dynamic nature of their positions (Mendels, 2012).

Instructional Significance

Not all elements of the assistant principal position are negative. Although underprepared, assistant principals are well positioned to begin leading instruction in their schools (Celikten, 2001; Hilliard & Newsome, 2013). In U.S. public schools, the

typical number of faculty members ranges from 40 to over 80, regardless of the academic level of the school or location in the country (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2007). It is common for a large portion of a school's teaching staff to receive formal instructional feedback and evaluations exclusively from assistant principals. In such cases, all instructional feedback, interventions, and supports are driven exclusively through the observing assistant principal. However, the instructional leadership capacity of assistant principals should not be assumed, as they often have not received any formal professional development in instructional leadership or strategies to help them advance the quality of learning in their schools (Goldring et al., 2021).

Although little research focused on the instructional leadership impact of assistant principals exists, there is a plethora of research related to the role of principals as instructional leaders and how their instructional leadership capacity has far-reaching implications for their schools. Boyce and Bowers (2018) found a principal's instructional leadership ability "has strong effects on school climate, teacher satisfaction, teacher commitment, and teacher retention" (p. 166). In their suggested leadership framework, Boyce and Bowers (2018) also found instructional leadership and human resource management have a "strong alignment with theory of leadership for learning" (p. 173). In other words, effective instructional leadership manifests in schools to promote a stronger whole-school culture and climate conducive to learning for all students.

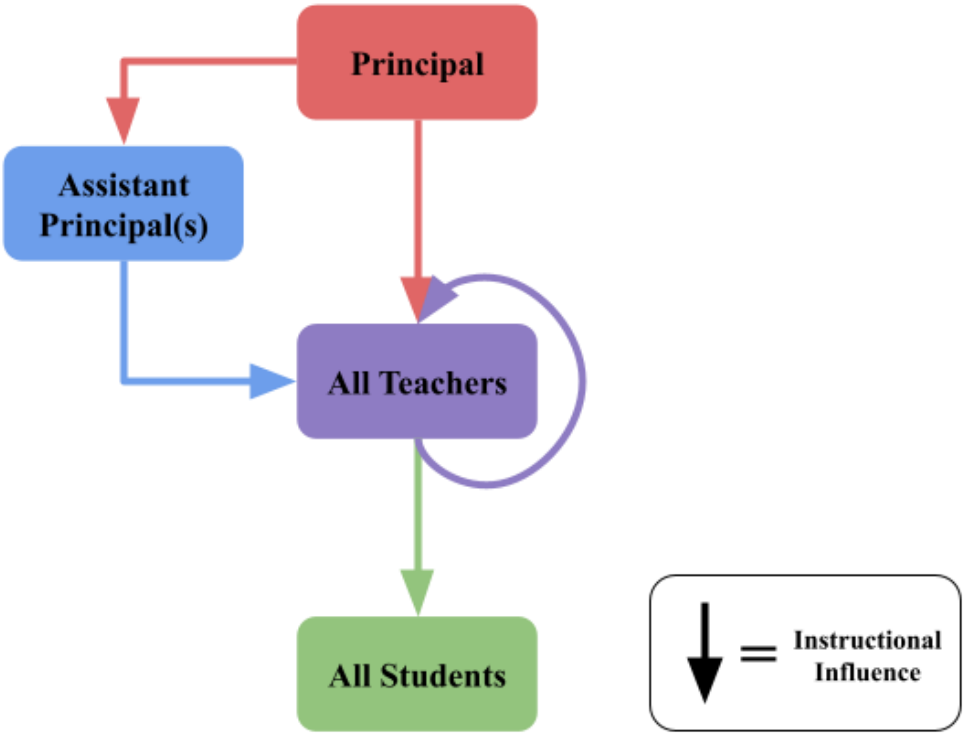
As instructional and accountability demands increase, the lines between assistant principals and principals are blurring, and it cannot be only principals who shoulder the burden of effective instructional leadership. Houchens et al. (2018) found assistant principals "would like to spend more time on instructional leadership concerns and less

time dealing with [managerial tasks]" (p. 40), despite a belief among principals that assistant principals wanted exactly the opposite. Also, as Hilliard and Newsome (2013) pointed out, "it is hoped that the assistant principal will soon assume the role as principal in a school" (p. 153). As key players in their systems, assistant principals are uniquely positioned to help lead instruction in their schools now and in the future as principals. Due to the ever-increasing demands placed on schools, every member of an administrative team needs to be able to effectively serve and lead in diverse ways, including instructional leadership (Smith & Andrews, 1989).

The scholar-practitioners developed a framework that demonstrates the flow of instructional influence in a school. This framework shows how principals and assistant principals influence teachers who, in turn, drive instructional outcomes for all students (see Figure 1). Assistant principals serve as key players in the instructional process despite being a secondary source of instructional influence for teachers, and the collective influence of principals and assistant principals drives the quality of outcomes for all students.

Figure 1

Flow of Instructional Influence



One way administrators' instructional leadership affects teachers is regarding teacher retention. Grissom (2018) found teacher turnover has a negative impact on schools and noted effective teachers who work for principals who provide clear, critical instructional feedback are more likely to stay at their school. The same study showed critical instructional feedback is likely to cause ineffective teachers to leave a school but receiving weak instructional feedback or being rated highly on formal observation tools is likely to keep them in the profession. In short, administrators who give critical instructional feedback can retain good teachers and are more successful at getting rid of

bad teachers. Employing strategies that keep effective teachers in place while reducing the presence of ineffective teachers will likely contribute to stronger student outcomes.

Administrators who lack instructional coaching and are not competent instructional leaders are more likely to mark teachers high on formal observation tools; thus, ineffective teachers are less likely to be removed from those schools (Grissom, 2018). Similarly, poorly trained administrators are unlikely to give the kind of critical instructional feedback that improves teachers' capacity to lead and teach in their classrooms. DeWitt (2019a) found administrators who are poorly trained instructional leaders often do not understand how to prioritize feedback on the elements of instruction that impact student learning. In another study, DeWitt (2019b) conducted a survey of several hundred principals and found only 24% of them felt "very confident" in their ability to lead and support instruction in their schools.

The significance of high-quality instructional leadership on teachers is undeniable. In fact, Ritter and Barnett (2016) found exemplary teachers wanted meaningful instructional feedback through regular evaluation; further, weak feedback quickly promoted failure and resentment. No element in schools has had a greater impact on students' growth and achievement than the teacher in the classroom, and developing teachers' instructional capacities should be the top priority of school administrators. Ritter and Barnett (2016) suggested meaningful critical feedback accomplishes this goal and contributes to a culture of "trust and shared responsibility" (p. 51) that promotes a stronger learning environment for teachers. Thus, instructional leadership goes beyond simple classroom feedback. Evaluating and supporting teachers, growing teachers' capacity for leading and teaching, and removing ineffective teachers from the classroom

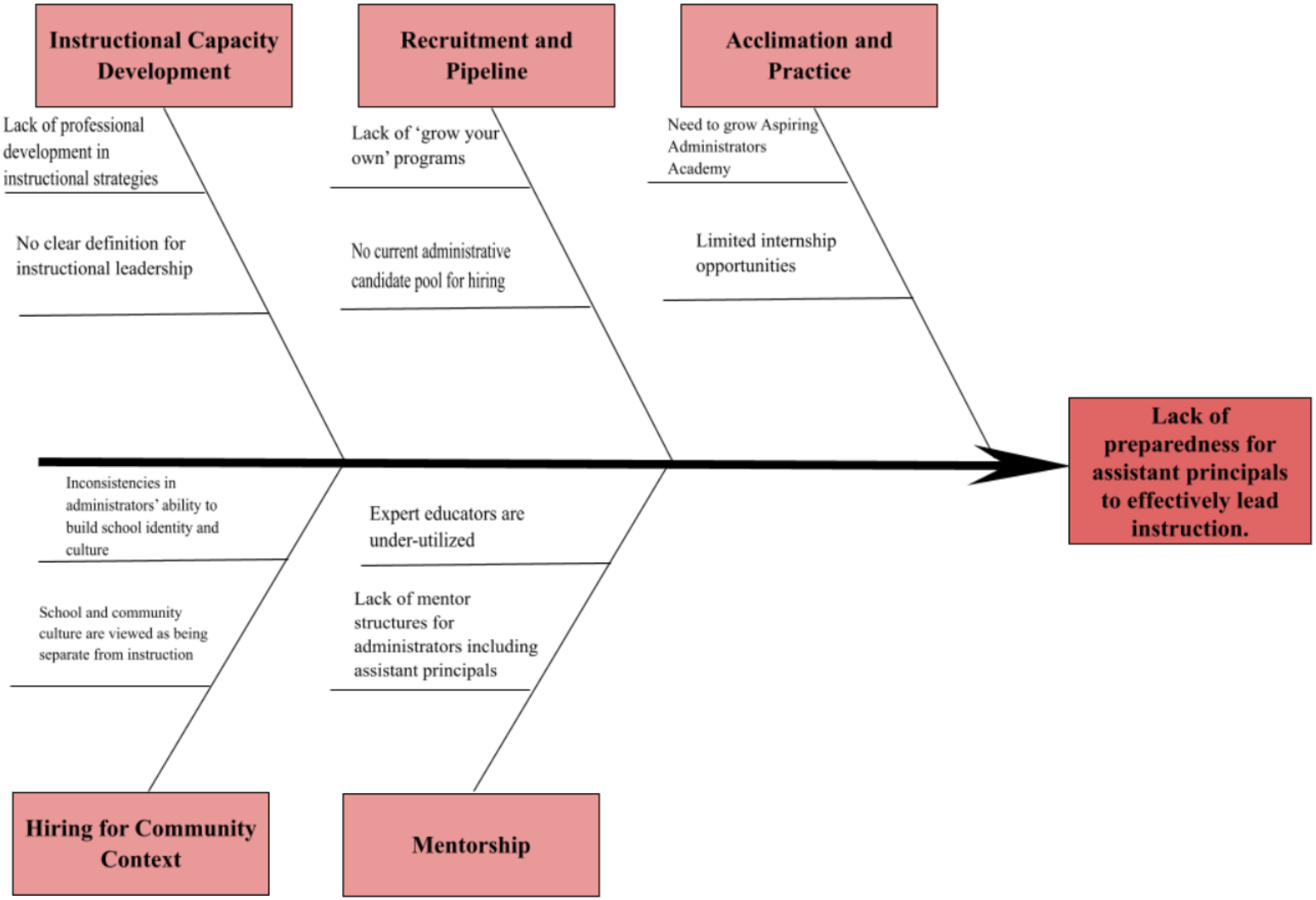
are critical functions of modern instructional leaders in their efforts to promote stronger student outcomes.

Causal Analysis

To illustrate what elements have contributed to the lack of instructional preparedness among assistant principals, the scholar-practitioners designed a causal analysis (see Figure 2). In the following sections, the scholar-practitioners describe the five contributing elements outlined in the causal analysis.

Figure 2

Causal Analysis of Lack of Assistant Principal Instructional Preparedness



Instructional Capacity Development

Instructional leadership is more important now than it has ever been and preparing principals and assistant principals to be effective instructional leaders should be a critical focus of school districts (Boyce & Bowers, 2018; Tirozzi & Ferrandino, 2000). Backor and Gordon (2015) studied university principal preparation programs and recommended "traditional principal preparation programs place a greater emphasis on the preparation of instructional leaders" (p. 122). They suggested these efforts be led by experts in the field of practice as opposed to experts in theory only. Although described as university principal preparation programs, these programs were not specific to principals and were the mechanism through which all aspiring administrators (i.e., principals and assistant principals) were trained. Principal preparation programs at universities are the current path to licensure for prospective administrators and are the only common development structure available for school administrators (Backor & Gordon, 2015). However, the ways university principal preparation programs should incorporate effective instructional leadership development practices might require looking beyond the university structure.

Preparing assistant principals as instructional leaders may best be viewed as a shared responsibility between school districts and universities. Some individual school districts have experimented with instructional leadership development structures for assistant principals in their districts. For example, Gurley et al. (2015) conducted a 2-year study of an assistant principal cohort trained as instructional leaders through a partnership between their district and a local university. They found assistant principals who participated in monthly half-day collaborative professional development sessions strengthened their instructional leadership capacities, demonstrated greater mastery of

district policies and goals, desired increased collaborative learning, and evidenced high levels of enthusiasm for continued growth. Participants noted the collaborative observation and feedback practice they experienced through the professional development helped catalyze their growth as instructional leaders). It is also noteworthy that eight of the assistant principal participants quickly became principals and the program produced positive feedback from school board members.

Collaboration plays a meaningful role in leadership development. Searby et al. (2017) supported the notion that assistant principal preparation programs should be a collaborative effort between university preparation programs and local districts. They recommended preparation programs collaborate with "school district leaders to design and deliver professional development and peer-mentoring opportunities for assistant principals" (Searby et al., 2017, p. 424). Their emphasis on a collaborative approach to instructional leadership development aligned with the extant literature about assistant principal preparation. In particular, participants noted mentoring as the most helpful activity that prepared them for instructional leadership.

Collaboration as an important element of instructional leadership development was underscored by Houchens et al. (2017), who found collaborative coaching "enhanced the instructional confidence of principals" (p. 35). Through a multicase study, Houchens et al. (2017) determined "improvements in student achievement hinge, in part, on improvements in principals' professional effectiveness" (p. 34), specifically their effectiveness as instructional leaders. Aided by the more formal professional development structure, principals in the study made moderate to "sweeping" (Houchens et al., 2017, p. 39) adjustments to their instructional leadership practices. The formal

structure seemed to produce the type of participant outcomes desired in an assistant principal preparation program. As Hoadley (2012) pointed out, communities of practice rely on an effective learning process, and highly formalized structures produce the kind of participatory collaboration that grows participants' capacity. Preparing current and aspiring assistant principals to operate as competent instructional leaders will advance the quality of teaching and learning in their schools.

Recruitment and Pipeline

Recruitment and internal pipelines contribute to the lack of instructional preparedness among assistant principals. In their study of recent administrative degree graduates, Whitaker and Vogel (2005) found the quantity of students completing administrative licensure programs was steady, but the number of applicants for administrative openings was in decline. Similarly, Adams (1999) noted principal openings that could have yielded strong candidate numbers in the past were garnering little interest from applicants.

Multiple factors contribute to the decreased interest in administrative positions. One contributor to the declining number of candidates could be the shift in expectations from the federal government around student outcomes due to No Child Left Behind. Tirozzi and Ferrandino (2000) discussed how No Child Left Behind increased accountability standards and, more specifically, tied them to principals more so than in previous legislation. The increase in expectations and accountability placed on principals, specifically about instructional quality in schools, has been regularly noted as one of the most significant factors preventing licensed candidates from applying for open administrative positions (Adams, 1999; Whitaker, 2003; Whitaker & Vogel, 2005).

Another trend of equal concern with the decreasing quantity of administrative candidates has been the quality of the candidates who apply for these roles. In fact, the reasons that qualified candidates choose not to apply for open administrative positions does not appear to be mutually exclusive from the reasons that contribute to decreased quantity. Whitaker (2003) noted reasons qualified candidates refrain from applying for administrative openings included hesitancy about shared decision making, increased accountability pressures placed on individuals, increased overall time requirements, and the changing roles and expectations of principals. Winter et al. (2003) noted increased pay and perceived increases in professional prestige did not mitigate negative perceptions of the job. Additionally, qualified candidates may not be interested in administrative openings due to their satisfaction with their teaching positions.

Acclimation and Practice

Recruiting candidates from within is one avenue for districts seeking qualified candidates for administrative positions. The school district of Prince George's County in Maryland provided an example of this approach to administrative candidate recruitment and development. The hiring process in this county consisted of three phases, the first of which required candidates to complete an assessment tool that measured their principal readiness and potential (Mendels, 2012). Candidates who scored well then moved on to scenario-based principal responses. Those who succeeded in the first two phases were then given the opportunity to interview with a panel of principal supervisors. Data collected from the first three phases were then used to pair candidates with schools of best fit. The district provided clear follow-up guidance to all candidates outlining why they were or were not selected for an administrative role. Further, the district used the

feedback for unselected candidates to inform professional development planning for the upcoming year to continue building the leadership capacity of their current teachers.

Another example of a school district attempting to create a pipeline of administrative candidates was Hillsborough County in Florida. McManus (2017) studied their principal pipeline and noted a strong introductory program was critical in developing stronger administrative candidates and administrators. During the opening phase, which they called LEAD-UP, candidates who had completed an administrative licensure program and were interested in administrative positions were coached by district leaders about the various administrator roles. Throughout the LEAD-UP process, participants were evaluated by area superintendents and principal coaches who also worked with participants individually during visits to their schools. McManus found the Hillsborough County principal pipeline had an overall positive impact on the district. Participating teachers reported being positively changed by their observing administrators, the district's graduation rate increased by 3%, and there were notable increases in proficiency scores among students of color.

Efforts to recruit from outside the district could be fruitful for finding current and future administrative candidates, especially for districts working to ensure diversity among their teaching and school leadership population reflects the district's demographics (Hale & Moorman, 2003). Diversity efforts warrant significant consideration as, for decades, researchers have been calling for greater diversity among teaching ranks because of the positive impacts teachers of color have on students of color (Villegas & Irvine, 2010). The ways districts recruit, retain, and support diverse individuals correlates strongly to the success districts observe with diverse students

(Brown & Butty, 1999; Fuller et al., 2019; Jimerson, 2019; Quezada & Louque, 2004). Districts that intentionally hire strong teaching candidates who accurately reflect the diversity of their school communities concurrently increase their internal pool of diverse candidates for administrative positions. Finally, for districts trying to hire with the diversity of their communities in mind, it is worth noting schools with principals of color are associated with increases in and retention of teachers of color (Grissom et al., 2017).

Mitigating the lack of diversity among teachers and administrators is possible, even for districts that have not had many local candidates of color. Districts could consider developing marketing and recruitment campaigns outside of the district that specifically target teaching and administrative candidates of color at colleges and universities with high concentrations of students and educators of color (Quezada & Loque, 2004). Intentionally recruiting and marketing openings to populations of color will challenge the norms of many current hiring practices. Further, by establishing successful hiring pipelines from teaching and administrative preparation programs, districts will increase candidates' interest in their openings (Brown & Butty, 1999). Finally, districts looking to pipeline the best administrative candidates to their schools should consider offering tuition assistance for individuals once they are hired. Not only will tuition assistance serve as an attractive option for candidates looking for positions, but district-directed tuition assistance has been shown to be effective in ensuring degree attainment by current administrators and promoting retention (Jimerson, 2019).

Cultivating Candidates From Teaching Ranks

Districts should implement intentional practices to identify potential administrative candidates from among their teaching ranks and encourage them to

explore administrative positions. According to Winter et al. (2003), districts should encourage, but not require, teachers to enroll in administrative degree programs because those who willingly enroll "are more viable as applicants for assistant principal vacancies than teachers who do not self-select" (p. 309) into such programs. Whitaker and Vogel (2005) noted, "It is imperative that leadership preparation programs recruit and train candidates who have the skills and desire to assume administrative positions" (p. 8). Observing which candidates respond to encouragement and then independently pursue their administrative degrees can help districts identify internal candidates earlier in their careers. However, university preparation programs alone may not effectively prepare candidates for administrative positions.

In theory, university preparation programs should offer candidates the skills and abilities needed for the administrative positions they obtain a license to perform. However, many programs lack instructors with real experience as administrators among those teaching the courses, which creates potential learning gaps for candidates. For example, most courses taught in university preparation programs across the country, such as North Carolina's Master of School Administration (MSA) program, are "still taught by professors who have not been principals or superintendents" (Davis, 2016, p. 9). However, universities could find ways to partner with districts to provide more relevant experiences during the administrative development process to mitigate the lack of on-the-job experience among program instructors (Gurley et al., 2015). Additionally, there are examples of programs outside of university settings that seek to solve this problem through student internship requirements arranged through established partnerships with school districts (NC Principal Fellows Program, n.d.-a).

Nationwide, one common internship requirement of administrative preparation programs is to place students with competent mentor principals. However, student experiences and outcomes can vary widely based on the quality, skills, and dispositions of the mentor principals (Thessin et al., 2020). Although the internship requirements have been designed with well-rounded emphases on all school administrator job requirements, little is known about the effectiveness of student internships in securing quality administrative candidates.

Some state legislatures have attempted to cultivate administrative candidates from their teaching ranks. One example is North Carolina. In 1987, the National Commission on Excellence in Educational Administration (NCEEA) found university administrative preparation programs across the country were inadequate in recruiting and preparing candidates to be successful school administrators. The NCEEA (1987) recommended over half of the country's administrative preparation programs be eliminated, and those that remained should be reformed with an emphasis on modern school leadership.

In response to the NCEEA proposal, in 1993, the North Carolina General Assembly created the Principal Fellows Program (PFP) in tandem with legislative action to reform university administrative preparation programs with newly designed MSA degree guidelines (Bastian & Henry, 2014). Additionally, the North Carolina General Assembly reduced the number of universities offering the new MSA degree program to seven. As of 2020, although schools in the University of North Carolina System are not required to offer the PFP, 11 of the 17 system universities provide the opportunity to their teachers.

The design of the PFP required fellows to enroll as full-time graduate students in a University of North Carolina System MSA program for 2 years. In their 1st year, fellows were required to attend graduate courses full-time, and in their 2nd year, they were required to serve as administrative interns in a school. In its original format, fellows completed their internship through a participating university and then served as a principal or assistant principal at a state public school for 4 years; otherwise, they would be required to pay back the scholarship loan with 10% interest compounded annually (NC Principal Fellows Program, n.d.-b). The 4-year timeline has two primary purposes: Candidates serve for a duration of time equivalent to the designated period required to (a) pay back the scholarship loan and (b) reduce administrative turnover by incentivizing candidates to stay in school administration positions. In 2015, the Education Policy Initiative at Carolina researched the effectiveness of the PFP graduates in schools and found fellows were as effective as other MSA graduates, and their leadership in schools correlated to modest improvements in student attendance, teacher retention, and outcomes on the North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey (Bastian & Fuller, 2015).

Despite initiatives like PFP, Winter and Morgenthal (2002) found districts with strong internal applicants still struggled to garner interest in administrative positions, particularly at schools considered low performing on school accountability measures. Although it may seem more logical to increase the attractiveness of administrative positions to teachers by emphasizing instructional leadership possibilities, shifting the mindsets of candidates may not be that simple. Although many candidates avoided administrative openings for reasons seemingly ancillary to instruction, Winter et al.

(2003) found shifting the primary role of an assistant principal position to emphasize instruction did not increase teachers' interest in the role.

Teachers also declined interest in assistant principal positions for other reasons. According to Gates et al. (2020), some candidates refrained from applying for open assistant principal positions because they felt they were not qualified or properly trained to succeed in an administrative role. These candidates contended few districts provide adequate funding for professional development opportunities focused on school administration. Gates et al. also suggested school districts should look for opportunities to learn from each other and weave administrative growth opportunities into their existing structures for teachers who may become administrators. These programs, such as the LEAD-UP program in Hillsborough County, Florida, detailed previously (McManus, 2017), can effectively acclimate teachers to administrative positions and dispel their concerns.

Hiring for Community Context

School and district community dynamics play a role in the assistant principals' lack of instructional preparedness. Mendels (2012) stated, "Too often, we sit and wait for that 'superprincipal' to show up and lead a school" (p. 49). Districts must hire the best candidates possible and then train them for their responsibilities serving students and teachers. Hiring candidates who are best suited to serve a particular school or community context and preparing them for that context is worth exploring. Administrators who understand the school and community context they serve may be better poised to lead successfully, and districts should consider what hiring practices and ideologies will result

in teaching and administrative populations that accurately reflect school and community demographics for each of their schools (Osborne-Lampkin & Folsom, 2017).

Research using school administrator demographic and turnover data has illuminated the impact of community representation on North Carolina school leaders. In a longitudinal study of North Carolina school administrators from the 2001–2002 to the 2012–2013 school years, Osborne-Lampkin and Folsom (2017) discovered approximately 75% of school principals in the state were White. During the same period, Gates et al. (2004) found principal turnover rates were higher in North Carolina school districts with higher percentages of students of color, concluding, "Principals who were the same race/ethnicity as the largest racial/ethnic group in their school were less likely to leave" (p. 3). Setting administrators up for success through the hiring process is one way districts can promote their success and long-term stability.

District leaders can also ensure their hiring practices acknowledge and mitigate bias that prevents efforts to promote diversity among their educators. An actionable step to an improved hiring process would be for districts to conduct blind reviews of applications by removing any demographic designations, (e.g., gender, race) and choosing candidates using criteria collaboratively set by hiring committees (Clifford, 2010). By ensuring equitable hiring and professional development practices, districts can encourage hiring leaders who are better suited to promote improved outcomes for their students of color (Fuller et al., 2019).

Mentorship

A lack of mentorship opportunities is another contributing factor to the lack of instructional preparedness among assistant principals. Thessin et al. (2020) found

educators who engaged in mutually beneficial mentoring relationships demonstrated increased capacity for leadership in their schools. Levin and Bradley (2019) found principal turnover led to internal instability in a school and "a loss of shared purpose and trust" (p. 7) among teachers that "can derail school improvement initiatives, making it difficult to build a school's capacity" (p. 8). The detrimental impact on teaching conditions created by a principal's exit from a school are significant, as "teaching conditions play a major role in teachers' decisions to change schools or leave the profession" (Sutcher et al., 2016, p. 6) and are closely connected to how teachers feel about the support received from their principals.

Between 2015 and 2017, the nationwide principal turnover rate was 18% while the North Carolina principal turnover rate was 23%, despite any impact made by the PFP (Levin & Bradley, 2019). Principal turnover can significantly damage the quality of the teaching and learning outcomes in a school (Levin & Bradley, 2019), and a lack of mentorship, high-quality preparation programs, and professional development opportunities significantly contributed to principals leaving their schools or the profession (Tekleselassie &Villarreal, 2011).

To support the growth of current and aspiring administrators, districts can prioritize mentorship. Mentorship opportunities allow aspiring administrators to become more familiar with the nuances of administrative positions before being hired as an administrator (Searby et al., 2017). New administrators can also benefit from mentorship as they work to acclimate to their positions.

Summary

Figure 2 details the causal relationships the scholar-practitioners discovered through the research process. The figure represents each contributing area of research as a branch that promotes more instructionally sound assistant principals (i.e., instructional development, recruitment and pipeline, acclimation and practice, hiring for community context, and mentorship). The scholar-practitioners applied these five elements to the structure of a school district in their region and discovered ways the district missed opportunities to fully realize the growth and development of their assistant principals as instructional leaders. These missed opportunities are represented as stems from each branch, all of which culminate in assistant principals who lack instructional preparedness to lead in their schools. With these factors in mind, the scholar-practitioners considered how to improve assistant principal instructional preparedness.

Problem of Practice in Local Context

For the purposes of this disquisition, the scholar-practitioners used Western Mountain Public Schools (WMPS) as a pseudonym for the site of their research. WMPS was the second largest school district in western North Carolina with 23 schools, 900 teachers, and approximately 13,500 students located in a primarily rural county with a population of approximately 117,500 residents (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction [NCDPI], 2018). WMPS demographic information about race can be found in Table 1. As the table shows, there was racial disparity between student and teacher demographic makeups that widened when comparing students to assistant principals and principals. These gaps are important to note given the direct impact leadership demographics have on instructional leadership, student outcomes, teacher outcomes, and

retention (Gates et al., 2004; Grissom et al., 2017; Hale & Moorman, 2003; Villegas & Irvine, 2010).

Table 1

WMPS Race Demographics by Percentage

Race	Students	Teachers	Assistant principals	Principals
White	65.42	94.35	92	100
Hispanic	24.29	3.24	8	0
Two or more	4.05	.24	0	0
Pacific Islander	.63	0	0	0
American Indian	.16	.12	0	0

Note: Student data taken from WMPS 2017–2018 Facts and Figures. Staff data taken from WMPS Department of Administrative Services.

WMPS, like many systems in North Carolina, found it challenging to recruit and hire competent, qualified, and prepared candidates for assistant principal openings. This difficulty recruiting and hiring included candidates who more accurately reflect student demographics in WMPS schools. Despite being the second-largest school district in the western region, WMPS district leaders expressed angst about the quality of assistant principal candidates. Assistant principal hiring decisions have historically been made at the district level but more recently were fully entrusted to school principals. Although WMPS has attempted to develop internal assistant principal candidates from among the district's teaching ranks, there is still room for growth.

As of the time of this writing, WMPS had no formal structure of professional development for assistant principals on effective instructional leadership. Principals in WMPS used their assistant principals in a variety of ways. All WMPS assistant principals

were tasked primarily with traditional managerial tasks and shouldered instructional responsibilities in their schools. In the majority of WMPS schools, observation and teacher evaluation requirements were broken up by department or teacher list and assigned to each member of the administrative team by the principal. Because of this division of labor, most WMPS assistant principals had sole responsibility for observation and evaluation of a substantial portion of teachers in their schools. This structure is challenging because WMPS does not offer any formal instructional leadership development opportunities for assistant principals. Instructional leadership capacity is simply assumed as part of their hire.

For additional context, NCDPI and the North Carolina General Assembly require school administrators to conduct and document multiple observations for every teacher and provide them with feedback using a rubric called the North Carolina Educator Evaluation System (NCEES, NC Educator Evaluation System, n.d.). Most teachers must be formally observed three times during an academic year using NCEES, although some teachers are only required to have two formal observations. The standard observation is 45 minutes long, although some teachers only require 20-minute "snapshot" observations. The NCEES tool has five standards to evaluate different elements of teacher effectiveness:

- Standard I: Teachers demonstrate leadership
- Standard II: Teachers establish a respectful environment for a diverse population of students
- Standard III: Teachers know the content they teach
- Standard IV: Teachers facilitate learning for their students

- Standard V: Teachers reflect on their practice

Whereas Standards II, III, and IV all relate in different ways to a teacher's classroom impact, Standard IV is most relevant to this study, as it specifically addresses instructional delivery (see Appendix A). The NCEES tool uses a scale of Not Demonstrated, Developing, Proficient, Accomplished, or Distinguished for a litany of elements under each standard (NC Educator Evaluation System, n.d.). Teachers must be rated Proficient at minimum to be eligible for continued contract renewal.

Like teachers, school administrators in North Carolina are also observed and evaluated using the NCEES tool. In that process, assistant principals are evaluated by their principals, and principals are evaluated by district-level leaders. The NCEES standards for school administrators are:

- Standard I: Strategic leadership
- Standard II: Instructional leadership
- Standard III: Cultural leadership
- Standard IV: Human resource leadership
- Standard V: Managerial leadership
- Standard VI: External development leadership
- Standard VII: Micropolitical leadership

As with the NCEES standards for teachers, only Standard II specifically addresses instruction, although all standards may have some degree of impact on instructional quality (see Appendix B). The NCEES tool also allows evaluators to rate administrators using the same scale for all elements under each standard (i.e., Not Demonstrated, Developing, Proficient, Accomplished, and Distinguished (NC Educator Evaluation

System, n.d.). As with teachers, school administrators must be rated at a minimum level of Proficient on each standard to be eligible for continued employment.

District data showed a disparity in WMPS between teacher and administrator evaluations and student outcomes (NC Educator Evaluation System, n.d.). In the 2017–2018 school year, 15% of teachers were rated Distinguished by their observing administrators in Standard IV. On the same standard, 61.9% of teachers were rated as Accomplished, 22.6% were rated as Proficient, .5% were rated as Developing, and 0% were rated as Not Demonstrated. For WMPS school administrators, 11.8% were rated as Distinguished by district-level observers, 50% were rated as Accomplished, 38.2% were rated as Proficient, and 0% were rated as Developing or Not Demonstrated in Standard II. In contrast, NCDPI (2018) data from the same year show 22.5% of WMPS students were rated as Exceeded Expected Growth (i.e., they performed better on state assessments than NCDPI predicted), 64.6% of students were rated as Met Expected Growth (i.e., they performed as predicted by NCDPI on state assessments), and 12.9% of students were rated as Did Not Meet Expected Growth (i.e., they performed lower than projected by NCDPI on state assessments).

Table 2 details the comparison between these elements. Teacher and administrator evaluation marks were inflated over actual student outcome data, highlighting how administrators' judgments of instructional impact in classrooms did not match the quality of the educational outcomes that students are demonstrating. With 99.5% of teachers being rated at or above Proficient and 100% of administrators being rated at or above Proficient in instructional delivery and leadership on their respective NCEES evaluations, one could expect higher than 87.1% of students to meet or exceed expectations.

Table 2

NCEES Scores Compared to Student Outcomes

	Not Demonstrated	Developing	Proficient	Accomplished	Distinguished
Teacher	0%	.5%	22.6%	61.9%	15%
Administrator	0%	0%	38.2%	50%	11.8%

	Did Not Meet Expected Growth	Met Expected Growth	Exceeded Expected Growth
Students	12.9%	64.6%	22.5%

Note: From *North Carolina School Report Cards*, by North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2018 (https://ncreports.ondemand.sas.com/src/). In the public domain.

To develop internal administrative candidates, WMPS has used a cohort-based administrative recruitment process called the Aspiring Administrator Academy (AAA). The premise of the AAA program was for each school principal to nominate one teacher they thought exemplified the traits, dispositions, and characteristics most conducive to administrative leadership. The aspiring administrators participated in monthly professional development sessions with district leaders, and each session was focused on one standard from the evaluation tool used for principals in North Carolina. Although the AAA has seemed to be a positive element for WMPS educators, there are currently no data to demonstrate the program has strengthened the quality or quantity of the district's administrative candidate pool.

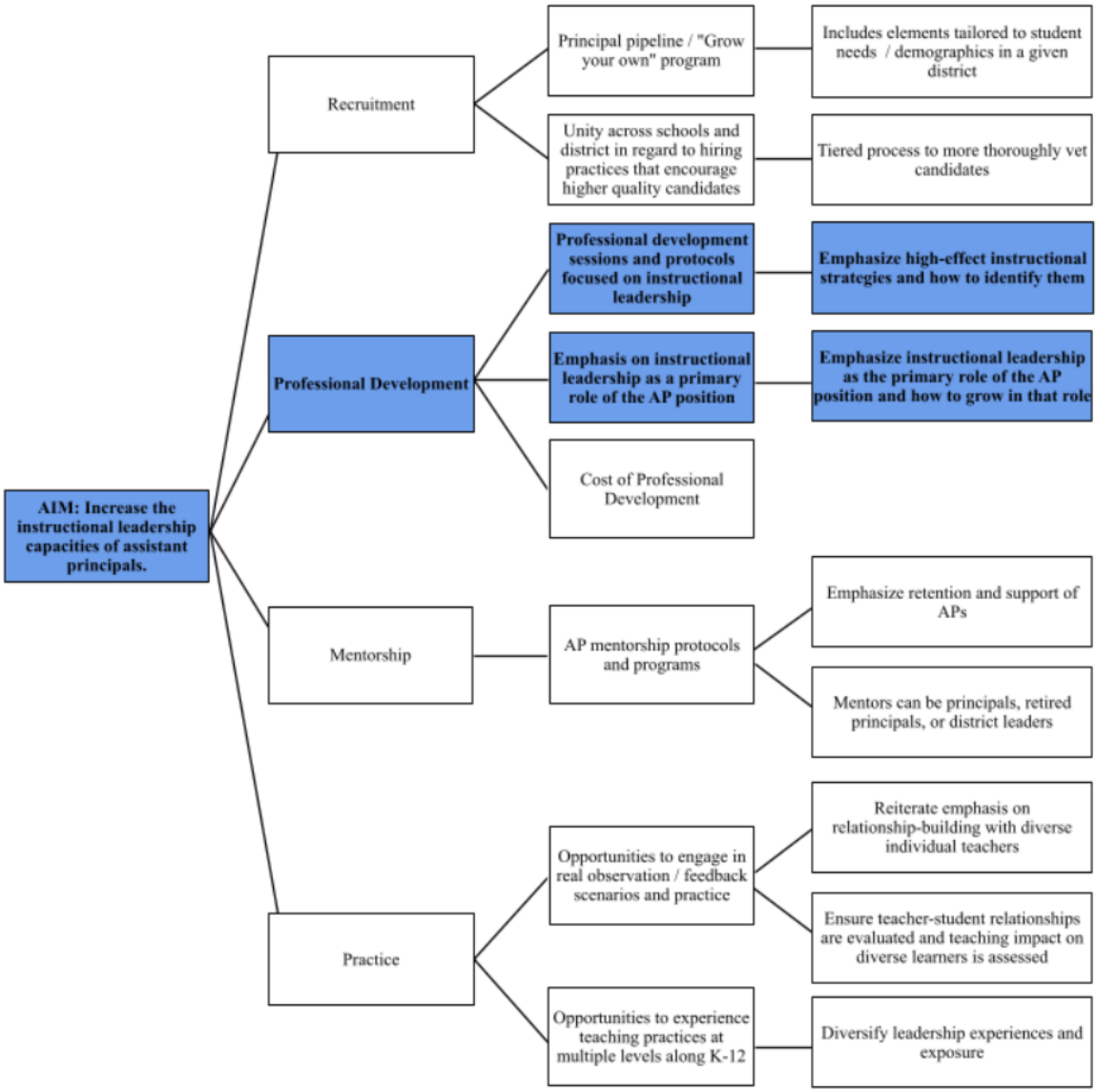
Theory of Improvement and Improvement Initiative

The significant impact high-quality instruction can have on all students demands all means of instructional improvements be explored. The impetus for increasing the instructional capacities of teachers and the quality of the academic product in classrooms

falls on the shoulders of school administrators. With a litany of increasing demands placed on principals and the need to prepare future principals, attention must be paid to the role of assistant principals to aid instructional improvement efforts. Assistant principals often share the instructional requirements of observations and feedback for as many—or more—teachers than principals, but assistant principals' ability to improve the quality of teachers is too often assumed. Therefore, the scholar-practitioners' theory of improvement is regular professional development sessions led by district personnel for current assistant principals can yield improved capacities for leadership, specifically instructional leadership. The first step for the scholar-practitioners was to outline the drivers of their identified problem in the driver diagram (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

Driver Diagram

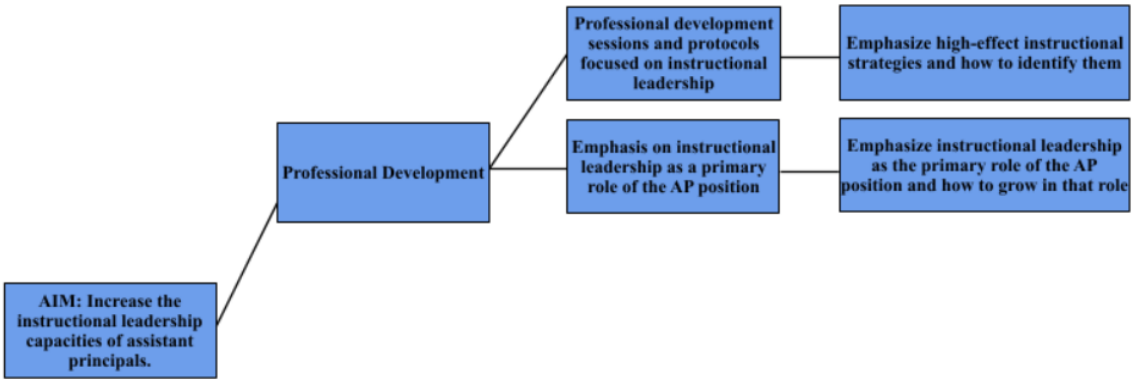


The driver diagram contains research-based theories about factors that influence assistant principals' instructional readiness (Bryk et al., 2015). Building from the research summarized in Figure 2, Figure 3 details ways in which the scholar-practitioners believe improvement can be effected. To specifically target measurable growth, the scholar-

practitioners narrowed their focus to professional development for assistant principals (see Figure 4) as an area they believed to be lacking across multiple contexts for educators. The scholar-practitioners further drilled down in each point to provide clarity about specific elements they planned to target, as assistant principal instructional improvement was still too broad for a series of professional development sessions. They determined professional development focused on highly effective instructional strategies supported by the research. This focus, paired with an overall emphasis on instructional leadership as the primary role of assistant principals, provided the scholar-practitioners the clarity needed to plan their improvement initiative.

Figure 4

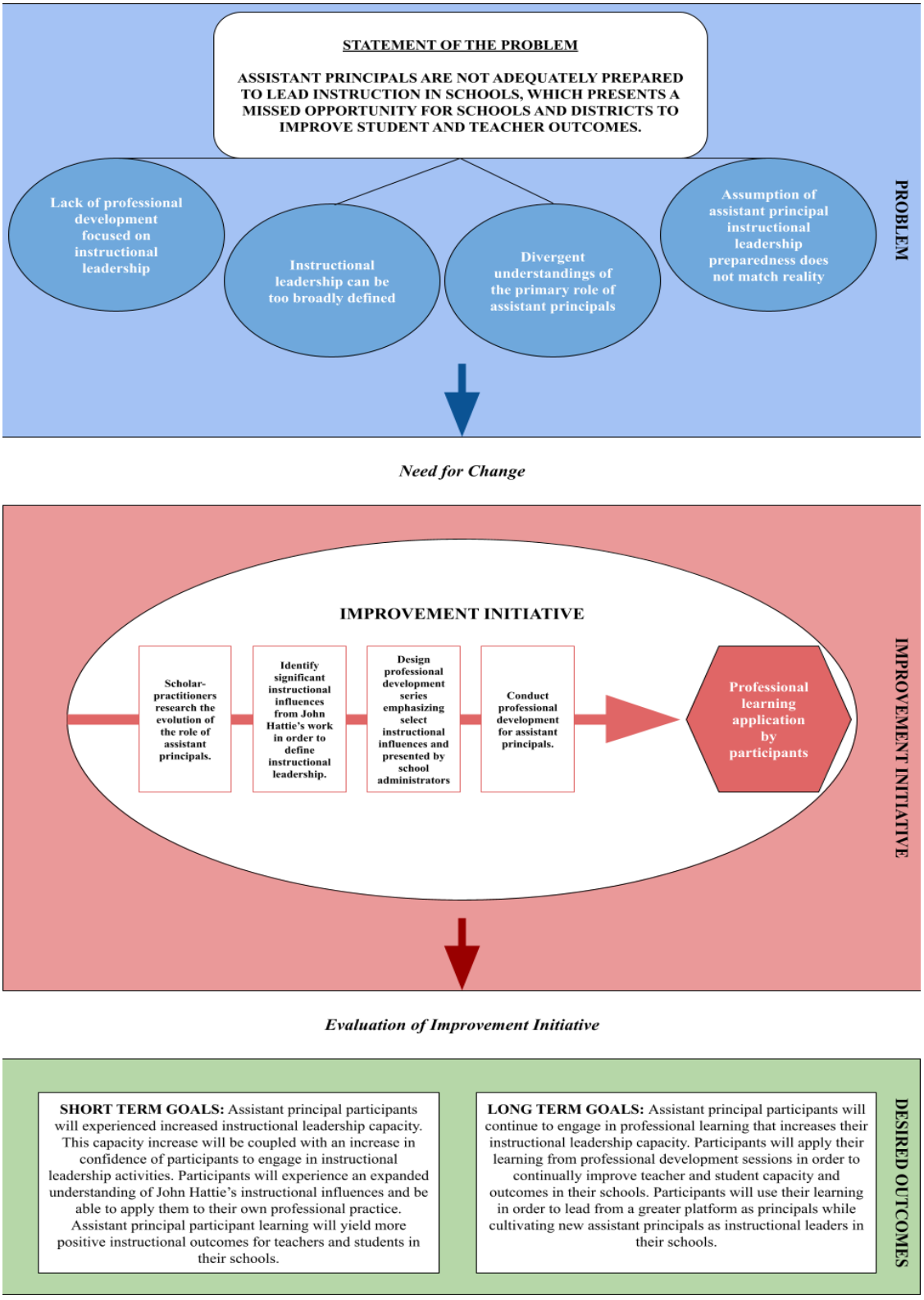
Narrowed Elements of Focus



The scholar-practitioners then outlined a conceptual framework for their improvement initiative (see Figure 5). This conceptual framework provided a visual representation of how the scholar-practitioners viewed the stated problem of practice in relation to their improvement initiative and desired outcomes.

Figure 5

Conceptual Framework



The overarching goal of this improvement initiative was to clearly define instructional leadership for participants through a series of professional development sessions designed to increase their capacity for instructional leadership guided by the work of John Hattie. Hattie's (2015) work on instructional effect sizes is well known and used worldwide in a variety of educational contexts. His work was selected for this study because it is respected and valued by educators across the nation; additionally, WMPS used some of Hattie's language during school walkthroughs and for conversations about classroom instruction.

John Hattie's Instructional Influences

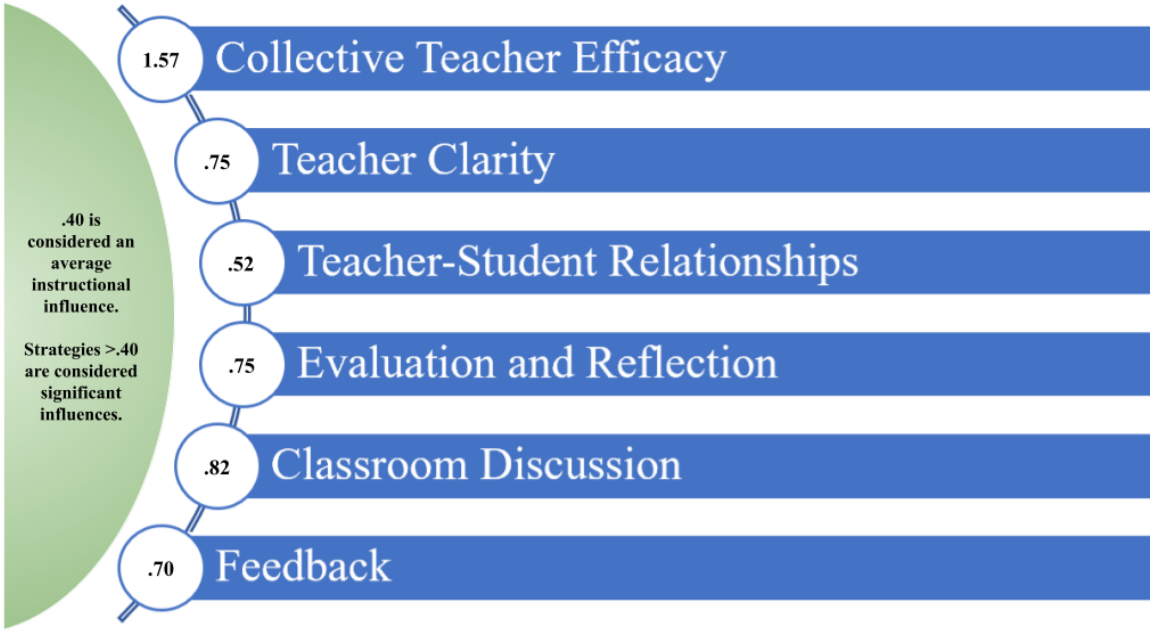
According to Hattie (2015), effective instructional leaders prioritize student learning and what impact individual teachers and the school have on student outcomes. For each *influence,* which are approaches, strategies, and actions enacted by teachers and school leaders, Hattie defined impact using effect size (ES) scores. There are over 250 different influences, and Hattie (2009) calculated each ES using Cohen's *d*. According to Cohen (1988), an ES of $d = 1$ is considered significant, effectiveness decreases as *d* decreases, and *d* can have an ES greater than one.

The scholar-practitioners selected six of Hattie's influences to define instructional leadership for this study (see Figure 6; Visible Learning, 2017). For this research, the scholar-practitioners defined *instructional leadership* as a participant's ability to successfully articulate, recognize, and reinforce collective teacher efficacy (ES = 1.57), teacher clarity (ES = .75), teacher–student relationships (ES = .52), evaluation and reflection (ES = .75), classroom discussion (ES = .82), and feedback (ES = .70). Each

influence has an ES score indicating a considerable potential to accelerate student achievement. In the next sections, the reasoning for choosing each influence is detailed.

Figure 6

Selected Instructional Influences and ES Scores



Note: Adapted from *Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*, by J. A. C. Hattie, 2009, Routledge. Copyright 2009 by John A. C. Hattie.

Collective Teacher Efficacy

As illustrated in Figure 6, collective teacher efficacy (CTE) has the highest ES score. Tschannen-Moran and Barr (2004) defined CTE as the shared belief by teachers that they make a difference in the academic outcomes of students beyond the influences of students' homes and community. Cultivating CTE in a school involves many stakeholders, and school administrators play a significant role in that process. Belfi et al.

(2015) found teachers developed more confidence in their own ability to make a difference in their students' academic outcomes when schools with a high percentage of socioeconomically disadvantaged students emphasized teacher–student relationships and supported their teachers in building a meaningful rapport with students and their parents. The scholar-practitioners selected CTE because it is among the strongest influences, and strong CTE in a school can transcend academic challenges and deficits that exist for students due to socioeconomic status, race, and adverse childhood experiences.

Teacher Clarity

With an ES of .75, teacher clarity represents another significant instructional influence. According to Hattie (2009), educational leaders often place too much emphasis on a teacher's level of personal and professional conduct and not enough on the actual effect they have on student learning. Emphasizing how a teacher teaches over their personality or professionalism shifts this paradigm to highlight clarity and communication as key components of a successful classroom. Teacher clarity is captured in a few different and observable elements. Fendick (1990) suggested teacher clarity is best defined by a teacher's degree of organization, degree of explanation, clarity of examples and guided practice, clarity of assessment of student learning, and clarity of teacher speech. As more of these elements are combined and regularly present, a higher level of teacher clarity exists. Tying teacher clarity to CTE, Hattie (2015) noted, "What matters are conceptions about teaching, learning, assessment, and teachers having expectations that all students can progress, that achievement for all is changeable (and not fixed), and that progress for all is understood and articulated" (p. 35). In other words, how teachers articulate their beliefs is as critical as what they believe.

Teacher–Student Relationships

The next significant instructional influence selected by the scholar-practitioners was teacher–student relationships, which has an ES of .52. According to Hattie and Yates (2014), positive teacher–student relationships have both immediate and long-term benefits on trust and student achievement and decrease the likelihood of students' antisocial behavior and other behavior problems. Hattie and Yates noted positive teacher–student relationships can also help mitigate the effects of a negative home life for students who might otherwise hinder their academic and socioemotional outcomes. Cornelius-White (2007) found teachers who emphasize positive relationships, or *learner-centered teachers*, are consistently associated with stronger student outcomes. These student outcomes include academic measures (e.g., higher levels of participation, critical thinking, math achievement, verbal achievement) and socioemotional measures (e.g., higher self-esteem, stronger social connections, motivation, decreased drop-out rates, disruptive behavior).

The scholar-practitioners selected this influence because the quality of relationships between a teacher and their students should be evident to administrators conducting classroom observations. Some relational factors that contributed to stronger student outcomes for the learner-centered teacher were nondirectivity (i.e., not heavily relying on directives), empathy, warmth, encouragement of higher order thinking, encouragement of learning, and genuineness (Cornelius-White. 2007). The scholar-practitioners contend these elements are observable and should manifest through regular interactions between teachers and students as well as classroom opportunities teachers plan for students.

Evaluation and Reflection

Evaluation and reflection, with an ES of .75, was also selected as an instructional influence for this research. Hattie (2009) noted the following related to teachers who have stronger student outcomes:

> It is the attention to the purposes of innovations, the willingness to seek negative evidence (i.e., seeking evidence on where students are not doing well) to improve the teaching innovation, the keenness to see the effects on all students, and the openness to new experiences that makes the difference. (p. 181)

The evaluation and reflection measure emphasizes the personal growth practices and beliefs of teachers rather than students. Teachers who collect feedback from their practice and students, reflect on practices that are and are not working, and use that information to improve their practice will consistently provide stronger outcomes for all students.

Teachers' mindsets about assessing students and their own practices matter greatly. Two widely known terms related to assessment in education are formative and summative assessment. These terms do not describe different kinds of assessments but instead how teachers choose to use an assessment. *Formative assessments* evaluate learning and are mechanisms through which the teacher can collect immediate feedback on the impact of their teaching strategies and students receive feedback about their current mastery of the content during the learning process (Hattie & Yates, 2014). This feedback can be used to improve the quality of teaching and learning immediately. Conversely, *summative assessment* is a more traditional approach to assessment (e.g., test, quiz, final project) with the emphasis on the outcome of the assessment instead of the learning process. An assessment can be used as either a formative or summative

assessment, but the process-oriented and timely nature of formative assessments make them most useful for improving learning and instruction.

Teachers who are willing and intentional about receiving formative feedback from their students, reflecting on it, using it to understand their current impact, and informing their next steps will tend to provide enhanced student outcomes (Hattie, 2009; Hattie & Yates, 2014). As with the other influences, the scholar-practitioners contend administrators should be able to identify evidence of evaluation and reflection during observations and through conversations with teachers. Additionally, with improved understanding of the value of formative over summative assessments, administrators will be better prepared to help teachers integrate regular formative assessment in their classrooms.

Classroom Discussion

A classroom where discussion is emphasized requires a teacher who is willing to shift from the proverbial "sage on the stage" to more of a "guide on the side." Teachers who emphasize classroom discussion will ask students more questions and engage them in discussions about the content instead of simply talking at their students about the content. According to Hattie and Yates (2014), student participation in conversations as a part of their own learning process is critical. Referring to this as a "conversational style" (Hattie and Yates, 2014, p. 65) of teaching, they noted students actively responded as a part of the discussion, as opposed to taking the passive role of listening, a key element of this approach.

Promoting students' active engagement in conversation requires the regular use of questioning. Although much emphasis is placed on teacher questioning strategies of

students, Hattie (2009) suggested the frequency and type of questions teachers ask students during learning yield the greatest insight into teacher questioning. Hattie (2009) pointed out, "Surface level questions can enhance surface knowing and higher-order questions can enhance deeper understanding" (p. 182). Unfortunately, teachers who believe it is their primary responsibility to pass knowledge along to students—a sage on the stage—as opposed to facilitating their learning through discussion, formative assessment, and exploration—a guide on the side—are more likely to ask surface-level questions that merely require students to recall information instead of engaging in higher order thinking. Although questioning has a standalone ES score as part of Hattie's work, the scholar-practitioners chose to include it as part of the classroom discussion process.

The ways in which teachers do or do not engage students in discussion and prompt student engagement in discussions through questions should be an easily observable instructional influence during the classroom observation process. Classroom discussion should be an attainable growth area for assistant principals participating in professional development sessions because of the black-and-white nature of how such discussion will unfold in a classroom setting: Teachers either engage their students in discussion and ask questions to facilitate the learning process or they do not.

Feedback

The feedback influence has a standalone ES score of .70 but is also intricately woven into Hattie's other influences. In fact, feedback must be paired with other strategies to achieve its peak effect (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Feedback can also be beneficial for improving and enhancing the teaching and learning process. For both teachers and students, receiving feedback on how to improve is more valuable than

simply being told what standards they met (Hattie & Yates, 2014). Effective feedback must have a clear purpose and should not be mysterious. Those receiving feedback should understand their eventual goal and how to bridge the gap between their current efforts and standards required to meet expectations (Hattie, 2009; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Hattie & Yates, 2014).

Just as with formative assessment, student-to-teacher feedback is as valuable for informing the effectiveness of a classroom feedback as teacher-to-student feedback (Hattie, 2009). Another valued element is how a teacher's willingness to use student feedback to improve their teaching practice (Hattie, 2009; Hattie & Yates, 2014). According to Hattie (2009), "Feedback to teachers helps make learning visible" (p. 173). It should be evident to the observing administrator how well a teacher takes their observation feedback and uses it to improve their practice. Teachers informing their teaching practice with student feedback will likely articulate how they use student data and what changes result from the feedback.

Teachers and students operate best in an environment if they know where they stand, what the expectations are, and how to grow to meet those expectations (Hattie, 2009; Hattie & Yates, 2014). The scholar-practitioners believe assistant principals play a critical role in the process of providing timely and clear instructional feedback to teachers, just as teachers are expected to provide feedback to their students. Feedback is observable in the classroom and through teachers' reflections about their own practice. School administrators' view of feedback, both personally and professionally, will inform how they value the process of giving feedback to teachers about classroom instruction; this is at the core of the scholar-practitioners' research. Building confidence about giving

and receiving feedback and knowing how to identify a healthy culture of feedback are high-priority elements of this improvement initiative.

Additional Context

Although assistant principals should learn about all high-effect instructional influences (Hattie, 2015), the scholar-practitioners believe increasing their capacity using the six selected influences combined with putting learning into practice will advance assistant principals' overall capacity for instructional leadership. Unlike teachers, who can practice their craft during student-teaching experiences under the guidance of a mentor teacher, assistant principals rarely have such opportunities. Few districts have plans for building the instructional leadership capacities of their administrators, and even fewer have formal arrangements for any administrative mentorship apart from the principals for whom assistant principals work (Mendels, 2012). Additionally, many districts lack funding to pursue such efforts, and districts in all contexts face decreased candidate pools and diminishing interest in open administrative positions (Whitaker & Vogel, 2005). However, the scholar-practitioners believe the format of this improvement initiative can be incorporated as part of a larger framework for districts to create a continuous process that yields instructionally strong administrators for their schools with minimal funding requirements.

Implementation of this improvement initiative sought to address the lack of instructional leadership development among assistant principals. Although district factors such as recruitment, professional development, mentorship, and opportunities for practicing instructional leadership skills and tasks all play roles in yielding assistant principals with strong instructional capacities, this work focused specifically on

professional development and practice. Assistant principals are the ideal target for this work due to the significant instructional potential of their position in schools across all contexts and the immediacy with which they can begin to work with teachers on improving instruction for all students in their classrooms (Celikten, 2001; Hilliard & Newsome, 2013).

Relationships play a critical role in the process of teaching and learning. Effective instruction does not occur in a vacuum, and the importance of relationships at work among administrators, teachers, and students must be considered. The scholar-practitioners believe assistant principals building positive relationships with teachers and students that promote shared efficacy will yield the greatest possible outcomes for all involved. To the scholar-practitioners' knowledge, no assistant principal professional development connects instruction with cultivating shared efficacy through building relationships across teachers' and students' race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Each of these factors impact school and classroom climate, culture, and opportunity. The absence of such professional development places the responsibility for capacity building on assistant principals without providing support from school districts, states, or education systems. Students' and teachers' individual backgrounds, perspectives, and beliefs matter in the classroom and providing a way to promote instructional delivery and feedback that is responsive to those factors represents a critical need. The scholar-practitioners want this work to be meaningful beyond the context of a single district and region. Therefore, it is critical to center this improvement initiative on professional development that emphasizes instruction and the other elements described previously for this work to be universally beneficial.

The scholar-practitioners maintain districts can take a broader approach to administrative recruitment, acclimation, and professional development to improve leadership capacities through the framework detailed in this improvement initiative, but this initiative will focus specifically on instructional leadership. The instructional leadership of school administrators has both immediate and long-term implications for teachers and students and should be a priority (Boyce & Bowers, 2018). Elements of this improvement initiative can be adopted by districts in other contexts, be implemented without significant budgetary requirements, and use the expertise of current district personnel.

Improvement Methodology

The first step of the design improvement process was to build a design team. The design team provided the scholar-practitioners with unbiased feedback and insight into design improvements from existing practitioners in the field. The intent was to build a design team that offered diverse insights, so the scholar-practitioners ensured each design team member possessed unique and relevant experience related to this work.

The first design team member was an instructional coach serving both middle school and high school settings in a suburban district in the mountains of North Carolina. He had 5 years of experience as an instructional coach and 18 total years of experience in education at the time of the improvement initiative implementation. The next design team member was the principal of an elementary school in a rural district in the Piedmont area of North Carolina. She had 5 years of experience as a principal and 13 total years of experience in education. The third design team member was a middles school assistant principal in a large, urban district in the Piedmont area of North Carolina with 1 year of

administrative experience and 13 total years of experience in education. The final member of the design team was a retired educator with 28 years of experience in education. She had worked in all school levels—kindergarten through 12th grade; held positions at the local, district, and state levels such as teacher, school administrator, and district administrator of instruction; and had led professional development for multiple regions of the state of North Carolina for the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI). A simplified version of the scholar-practitioners' initial improvement initiative timeline can be found in Table 3, and a detailed version can be found in Appendix C.

Table 3

Overview of Implementation Timeline

May 2021–June 2021	May 2021–June 2021	May 2021–June 2021
Develop and meet with design team	Conduct focus group	Collect postparticipation data
Plan professional development	Conduct learning sessions	Conduct focus group
Secure speakers for learning sessions	Meet with design team	
Open registration for participants	Collect participant data	
Collect preparticipation data		

The scholar-practitioners first met with the design team in early May 2021. The team meeting was virtual due to the large distances between team members and to exercise caution because of the COVID-19 global pandemic. The design team used a plan, do, study, act (PDSA) cycle to inform decisions about the improvement initiative, which is used in research to allow change to occur based on a system's needs as determined by participant feedback (Crow et al., 2019).

In the first meeting, the design team discussed the scholar-practitioners' problem of practice and proposed next steps, and the team members offered their feedback. The scholar-practitioners then adjusted the first PDSA cycle as the following questions recommended by Langley et al. (2009) were clarified:

- What are we trying to achieve?
- How will one know if there was any improvement?
- What changes can we make that will lead to improvement?

Specifically, the design team and scholar-practitioners set a topic order for the professional development sessions, finalized a list of proposed speakers to contact, and adjusted communication plans for marketing the sessions.

After adjusting the first PDSA cycle in response to the design team's feedback, the scholar-practitioners reconvened in mid-May 2021 to identify and plan actionable steps for the improvement initiative. The scholar-practitioners then conducted their second PDSA cycle and adjusted session formats and order. Based on feedback from the design team, the scholar-practitioners also decided to shift the mode of implementation for the professional development sessions. Given challenges associated with the COVID-19 global pandemic, the design team believed a virtual platform would be the best meeting format for implementation instead of asking potential participants to engage in learning in an in-person setting and would encourage the most participation from across North Carolina. The scholar-practitioners began formal planning of the professional development implementation by the end of May 2021 and secured guest speakers for each session. Five speakers served in school or district administrative positions, and the sixth speaker worked for the NCDPI.

By early June 2021, the scholar-practitioners sent information and registration links for the professional development sessions to assistant principals via third parties. All third parties were regional education organizations serving each of the various regions of North Carolina (i.e., Central Carolina Regional Education Service Alliance, Northeast Region Education Service Alliance, Northwest Region Education Service Alliance, Piedmont-Triad Education Consortium, Sandhills Region Education Consortium, Southeast Education Alliance, Southwest Education Alliance, Western Region Education Service Alliance) who used their existing email lists to contact their regional school districts and posted on their organization websites. A digital flyer was used to share information about the sessions with third parties.

The scholar-practitioners organized registration for the sessions through Qualtrics. As participants registered, they were sent consent forms and presurvey material (detailed in the next section). Registration remained open until the date of the first session, July 8, 2021. Prior to the first session, the scholar-practitioners conducted a focus group with a random selection of four participants to understand their perspective on the items included in the focus group question protocol in Appendix D.

Table 4 details the schedule of the professional development sessions and their topics, which were aligned with the six identified instructional influences. Each session occurred in the evening and lasted 90 minutes. Participants were asked to provide qualitative feedback using journal prompts at the conclusion of each session (see Appendix E). After the conclusion of the final session, participants were asked to conduct formal classroom observations of teachers in their schools in addition to completing their journal prompts. Participants wrote a brief reflection about those observations and

feedback experiences. After sessions had concluded, the scholar-practitioners conducted another focus group to collect qualitative data; three participants were randomly selected from among those who completed the six sessions. All participants were asked to complete a postsurvey after the conclusion of the last session.

Table 4

Professional Development Schedule

Session number	Session topic	Session date
1	Student–teacher relationships	July 8, 2021
2	Classroom discussion	July 15, 2021
3	Teacher clarity	July 20, 2021
4	Collective teacher efficacy	July 28, 2021
5	Evaluation and reflection	August 4, 2021
6	Feedback	August 11, 2021

Research Design and Procedure

This section details the scholar-practitioners' research design implementation and procedures, including the data collection tools and timeline used for their summative evaluation (see Table 5).

Table 5

Summative Evaluation Tools and Timeline

Data source	Frequency/Timeline	Analysis strategy
Participant focus groups	One prior to start of professional development series One after the conclusion of professional development series	Verbatim transcriptions, in vivo coding
Noninstructional duties pre- and post-surveys	Presurvey conducted prior to start of professional development series Postsurvey conducted after the conclusion of professional development series	Independent samples *t* tests
Hattie pre- and post-surveys	Presurvey conducted prior to start of professional development series Postsurvey conducted after the conclusion of professional development series	Independent samples *t* tests
PIMRS pre- and post-surveys	Presurvey conducted prior to start of professional development series Postsurvey conducted after the conclusion of professional development series	Independent samples *t* tests
Postlearning session reflection journals	Conducted at the conclusion of each of the six professional learning sessions	Verbatim transcriptions, in vivo coding
Participant pre- and post-participation journals	Presurvey conducted prior to start of professional development series Postsurvey conducted after the conclusion of professional development series and after applicants applied learning in their schools	Verbatim transcriptions, in vivo coding

Individuals who registered for the professional development sessions completed a presurvey about participants' demographic information and years of experience along with several evaluation questionnaires to provide baseline data for the research implementation. The survey required participants to self-evaluate their practice using questions from the Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (PIMRS) by Dr. Philip Hallinger (Hallinger & Wang, 2015; see Appendix F). The scholar-practitioners

used the PIMRS question protocol to gain insight into candidates' administrative job practices and behaviors related to instruction. In addition to the PIMRS, which is a frequency measure, the scholar-practitioners included a questionnaire about participants' comfort level with various instructional activities related to the six selected Hattie instructional influences (see Appendix G). The scholar-practitioners also included questions about other essential administrative roles ancillary to instruction (i.e., managerial, human resource, and micropolitical tasks) as balancing measures to understand what impact the improvement initiative had on these other roles (see Appendix H). According to Crow et al. (2019), it is essential for an improvement initiative to not adversely impact another part of an organization. Although the scholar-practitioners did not believe the improvement initiative would alter candidate capacity in other administrative roles, the measures were implemented to confirm this hypothesis.

In addition to providing baseline data for the research, the scholar-practitioners also shared data specific to each learning session with that session's presenter, which allowed presenters to tailor their sessions to the learning needs of the group and learning goals identified by participants. Presenters were not provided with any means of identifying individual participants.

Prior to the first professional development session, the scholar-practitioners conducted a focus group with four randomly selected participants. The scholar-practitioners selected focus groups as a data collection strategy for multiple reasons**.** According to Morgan (1996), focus groups offer rich feedback and data because participants can both question each other and explain their own perspectives in a forum that allows them to speak as much or as little as they choose. Focus groups also allow

topics and conversations to naturally develop and group members to discuss topics for varying lengths of time. Morgan found focus groups "give a voice" (p. 133) to marginalized groups, which is important to this research, as the scholar-practitioners can give assistant principals an opportunity to voice their needs, insights, and observations about instructional leadership.

As an additional means of collecting qualitative data, participants were asked to complete short (half-page or less) journal entries at the conclusion of each professional development session (see Appendix E for journal prompts). The journal entries collected from participants served as driver measures with their initial goals serving as the baseline. Participant feedback informed the design team's PDSA cycles after each session so that the scholar-practitioners were able to make changes as needed. Crow et al. (2019) noted driver measures should provide scholar-practitioners with a reliable prediction of the overall outcome of their improvement initiative. Therefore, the scholar-practitioners knew participant journal entries should reliably indicate whether the improvement initiative was working throughout implementation.

After the final professional development session, participants were asked to put their learning into practice in their schools by conducting at least three formal classroom observations of teachers using the North Carolina Educator Effectiveness System protocol and writing a brief reflection about one of their experiences (see Appendix I for the reflection prompt). This reflection served as the scholar-practitioners' process measure to see how the improvement initiative was working in practice. According to Crow et al. (2019), process measures help scholar-practitioners determine whether an improvement initiative is creating the intended change. Getting this feedback from

participants after they had the opportunity to put their learning into practice gave the scholar-practitioners insight into how the improvement initiative worked.

Overall feedback about the improvement initiative was gathered in two ways. First, the scholar-practitioners conducted a focus group with three randomly selected session participants following the same question protocol as the initial focus group. Second, the scholar-practitioners asked all participants to complete a postsurvey with identical questions to the presurvey. Data from these two surveys were used as quantitative data to compare improvement on outcome measures.

Participants

A total of 32 participants registered for the professional development sessions, and 23 participants completed all sessions and data collection activities. Participants were required to be currently serving as an assistant principal and were asked to provide information including their gender, years of administrative experience at their current school, total years of administrative experience, and school level. Information for participants who completed the sessions can be found in Table 6.

Table 6

Participant Information

School level	Years of administrative experience at current school	Total years of administrative experience	Gender
Elementary school	1	1	Female
Elementary school	1	1	Female
Elementary school	1	2–4	Female
Elementary school	2–4	2–4	Female
Elementary school	2–4	5–9	Female
Primary and intermediate school	1	1	Female
Middle school	1	1	Male
Middle school	1	2–4	Male
Middle school	1	5–9	Female
Middle school	2–4	2–4	Male
Middle school	2–4	2–4	Male
Middle school	2–4	2–4	Female
Middle school	5–9	5-9	Female
High school	1	1	Female
High school	1	1	Female
High school	1	1	Female
High school	1	2–4	Female
High school	1	2–4	Female
High school	2–4	2–4	Female
High school	2–4	2–4	Female
High school	2–4	2–4	Female
High school	2–4	5–9	Male
High school	5–9	5–9	Female

Participants were also asked to identify their school districts. Participants who completed the professional development sessions represented 15 school districts from across the state of North Carolina. Most participants were located in the mountains of western North Carolina or the coastal plains of eastern North Carolina. Participant school district locations can be found in Figure 7.

Figure 7

Participant School District Locations

Quantitative Data

The scholar-practitioners designed their quantitative data collection with the intention of comparing pre- and post-survey data to determine the effectiveness of the improvement initiative. Independent samples *t* tests were conducted to determine the difference between the presurvey and postsurvey participant responses. The *t* tests also determined whether the null hypothesis was accepted or rejected. In quantitative research, the null hypothesis assumes there is no relationship between the groups and conditions being investigated (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). In this research, the scholar-practitioners' null hypothesis was that no statistically significant relationship existed between professional development for assistant principals and their instructional leadership capacity. For each *t* test, the null hypothesis stated:

H_0: $\mu 1 = \mu 2$

H_1: $x1 \neq x2$

Hattie Questionnaire

The scholar-practitioners also conducted independent samples *t* tests for each question in the Hattie questionnaire. For the Hattie questionnaire, Group 1 for each question consisted of 32 participants who registered for the professional development sessions and completed the Hattie questionnaire presurvey. Group 2 for each question consisted of 20 participants who completed all professional development sessions and completed the Hattie questionnaire postsurvey. The scholar-practitioners found participant responses indicated improved confidence in each domain of instruction included in the Hattie questionnaire, which were collective teacher efficacy, teacher–student relationships, evaluation and reflection, classroom discussion, teacher clarity, and feedback. Table 7 details the data for each *t* test by question.

Table 7

Hattie Questionnaire t *Test Data*

Question domain	Question: How confident are you in your ability to . . . ?	Group 1 *M*	Group 1 *SD*	Group 2 *M*	Group 2 *SD*	*t*	*p*
Collective teacher efficacy	Identify the elements of strong teacher culture in your school	4.19	0.535	4.5	0.513	-2.102	0.042*
	Facilitate collective action among our teachers that benefit student instructional outcomes (i.e., PLC, shared decision making)	3.84	0.92	4.2	0.834	-1.44	0.157
Teacher–student relationships	Identify evidence of positive teacher student relationships during classroom observations	4.53	0.507	4.6	0.503	-0.478	0.635
	Support a teacher's growth in building more effective relationships with students in their class	4.28	0.729	4.35	0.745	-0.326	0.746
Evaluation and reflection	Identify effective uses of formative and summative assessment during classroom observations	4.13	0.751	4.3	0.733	-0.83	0.411
	Promote reflective teaching and learning practices in your school	3.94	0.84	4.1	0.852	-0.673	0.505
Classroom discussion	Identify effective questioning and discussion strategies in classrooms	4.06	0.759	4.26	0.733	-0.932	0.357
	Assist teachers in developing more effective questioning strategies and cultivating student discussion about content in their classrooms	3.88	0.907	4.05	0.945	-0.66	0.513
Teacher clarity	Identify the effectiveness and clarity of classroom instruction and expectations	4.13	0.751	4.35	0.671	-1.123	0.268
	Guide teachers to develop and implement lessons that have a clear focus on appropriate learning targets	3.78	0.975	4.15	0.933	-1.362	0.18
Feedback	Have a conversation with any given teacher that results in the improvement in the overall quality of teaching in their classroom	4.03	0.897	4.05	0.887	-0.074	0.942

Question domain	Question: How confident are you in your ability to . . . ?	Group 1 *M*	Group 1 *SD*	Group 2 *M*	Group 2 *SD*	*t*	*p*
	Have a difficult conversation with any given teacher about the quality of their classroom instruction	3.66	1.004	3.8	1.152	-0.46	0.648

* $p \leq .05$

Only one question indicated a statistically significant value ($p \leq .05$). The independent samples *t* test for the first question, "How confident are you in your ability to identify the elements of strong teacher culture in your school?" yielded a *p* value of .042. This increase is notable because collective teacher efficacy has the highest effect size (ES = 1.57) on student learning (Visible Learning, 2017). This significant improvement in assistant principal confidence could be a result of the collective of professional development sessions as opposed to the single session on collective teacher efficacy. It is also possible participants experienced a shift in their understanding of what constitutes "strong teacher culture" through participating in the sessions.

The two domains of collective teacher efficacy and teacher clarity yielded the strongest improvements in participant confidence. In each domain, questions focused on assistant principal confidence during interactions with teachers in an active and collaborative fashion (e.g., facilitating collective action among teachers, guiding teachers to develop lessons with a clear focus on appropriate learning targets). The significance of participant growth in these domains is assistant principal gained confidence through professional development more immediately than in more deliberate interactions with teachers surrounding instructional improvements.

For the Hattie questionnaire, 11 of the 12 domains did not show statistically significant changes in participants, although there was growth in each domain. The lack of statistical significance could be the result of several factors. It is likely participants developed a greater understanding of the domains and the responsibilities associated with each as part of their own professional practice. Improved participant understanding could have been closely associated with smaller changes in confidence in each domain as

candidates gained a better perspective of many ways to engage in instructional leadership activities. The growth may reflect modest improvements in confidence but not certainty for each participant as to the best way of implementing their learning in their school.

The scholar-practitioners also conducted an independent samples *t* test for the overall Hattie questionnaire based on participant mean scores for each question. For this *t* test, Group 1 consisted of presurvey participant mean scores for the 12 questionnaire items ($M = 4.0333$, $SD = .23941$). Group 2 consisted of postsurvey participant mean scores for the 12 questionnaire items ($M = 4.2292$, $SD = .21790$). The difference between the two groups was not statistically significant at the $p \leq .05$ standard ($t = -2.024$, $p = .055$), but participant responses indicated markedly improved confidence in each domain of instruction included in the Hattie questionnaire.

PIMRS Questionnaire

The scholar-practitioners conducted independent samples *t* tests for each question in the PIMRS questionnaire. The null hypothesis for the PIMRS questionnaire stated there was no relationship between assistant principal PIMRS self-evaluation and professional development. Independent samples *t* tests were conducted to determine the difference between presurvey and postsurvey participant responses. For each *t* test, the null and alternate hypotheses stated:

H_0: $\mu 1 = \mu 2$

H_1: $x1 \neq x2$

For the PIMRS questionnaire, Group 1 for each question consisted of 29 participants who registered for the professional development sessions and completed the PIMRS questionnaire presurvey. Group 2 for each question consisted of 23 participants who

completed all professional development sessions and completed the PIMRS questionnaire postsurvey. The scholar-practitioners found most participant responses were not statistically significant ($p \leq .05$), although there were notable shifts on select items from PIMRS (see Table 8). Only one item, rewarding special efforts by teachers with opportunities for professional recognition, demonstrated a statistically significant outcome. The scholar-practitioners did not operationally define special efforts as part of this work, but recognizing and celebrating others could be considered part of collective efficacy.

Table 8

PIMRS Select Data

PIMRS question: To what extent do you . . . ?	Group 1 *M*	Group 1 *SD*	Group 2 *M*	Group 2 *SD*	*t*	*p*
Conduct informal observations in classrooms on a regular basis (informal observations are unscheduled, last at least 5 minutes, and may or may not involve written feedback or a formal conference)	3.41	1.086	3.91	0.793	-1.914	0.061
Make clear who is responsible for coordinating the curriculum across grade levels (e.g., the principal, vice principal, teacher-leaders)	3.21	1.177	3.65	1.071	-1.426	0.16
Encourage teachers to use instructional time for teaching and practicing new skills and concepts	4	0.802	4.39	0.783	-1.771	0.083
Reward special efforts by teachers with opportunities for professional recognition	2.62	1.083	3.3	1.295	-2.031	0.048*

* $p \leq .05$

Participating assistant principals reflected shifts of note on measures for (a) conducting informal classroom observations and (b) encouraging teachers to use instructional time for teaching and practicing new skills and concepts. Given PIMRS is a frequency measure, increases in reported instances of these activities among participants marks an important shift. The increased frequency was likely related directly to the noted increase in participant instructional confidence indicated by responses to the Hattie questionnaire. Participants also demonstrated an increased frequency related to clarity about who was responsible for coordinating different components of curriculum. The scholar-practitioners believe this improvement aligns with participant increases in confidence surrounding the concept of clarity, as demonstrated by the Hattie questionnaire. Overall, the concepts of collective teacher efficacy and clarity stood out as the most notable shifts in participant outcomes resulting from the professional development sessions.

Importantly, only one of 50 items on the PIMRS questionnaire showed a statistically significant change for participants. Although there was notable growth in several items already discussed, the lack of statistical significance could have resulted from several factors. Some participants indicated they had recently started assistant principal positions or had changed districts over the summer at the time of this research. Those participants would likely not have established a sense of normalcy in their new positions within the 1st month of the school year. Another contributing factor may have been the timing of the presurvey; it was distributed to participants in the month of June, which is usually when the school year ends, and the postsurvey was distributed at the start of a new school year. Participants may have been more engaged in instructional

activities at the end of the previous school year than they were at the beginning of the new one, which may have contributed to the lack of statistical significance of more questionnaire items.

Noninstructional Duties Questionnaire

The scholar-practitioners also conducted independent samples *t* tests for each of the questions in the noninstructional duties questionnaire (see Appendix H), which was used as a balancing measure. The null hypothesis for the noninstructional duties questionnaire stated there was no relationship between the assistant principal noninstructional duties self-evaluation and professional development. Independent samples *t* tests were conducted to determine the difference between presurvey and postsurvey participant responses. For each of the *t* tests, the null and alternate hypotheses stated:

H_0: $\mu 1 = \mu 2$

H_1: $x1 \neq x2$

For the noninstructional duties questionnaire, Group 1 for each question consisted of 29 participants who registered for the professional development sessions and completed the noninstructional duties questionnaire presurvey. Group 2 for each question consisted of 20 participants who completed all professional development sessions and completed the noninstructional duties questionnaire postsurvey. The scholar-practitioners found most measures did not indicate a statistically significant difference ($p \leq .05$). However, the items represented in Table 9 offer insight into the impact of the professional development on the balancing measures.

Table 9

Balancing Measure Select Data

Noninstructional duties: In your current role as an administrator, to what extent do you effectively . . . ?	Group 1 *M*	Group 1 *SD*	Group 2 *M*	Group 2 *SD*	*t*	*p*
Balance your time and responsibilities	3.82	0.67	3.32	0.582	2.748	0.009*
Stick with the daily schedules you set for yourself	3.62	0.677	3.2	0.768	1.977	0.055
Manage job-related stress	3.66	0.67	3.25	0.416	1.998	0.053
Balance competing job-related responsibilities	3.83	0.658	3.5	0.607	1.793	0.08

* $p \leq .05$

A statistically significant decrease was found in participants' perceptions of their effectiveness balancing their time and responsibilities. The data also showed a decrease in participants' perceptions of being able to effectively stick with their daily schedules, manage job-related stress, and balance competing job responsibilities, although these results fell just outside of the threshold for statistical significance. No changes in items related to student discipline, positive student and staff conduct, communication, community relationships, or leadership voice demonstrated a statistically significant difference.

It is interesting that participants only demonstrated decreased perceived efficacy in balancing elements related to managing time, schedules, competing job responsibilities, and stress. These results suggest as participants placed greater emphasis on instructional leadership, their level of stress and conflict about which job-related roles to prioritize each day increased. This increase may be especially common among assistant principals who have served in their positions without prioritizing instructional leadership. For these individuals, increased emphasis on instructional leadership tasks

may feel like a more substantial shift than to a newer assistant principal who has not yet become firm in a routine of expectations and priorities. Although the literature has shown assistant principals can no longer simply be viewed as the barons of books, buses, and butts, the data here suggest assistant principals who make instructional leadership a greater daily priority need support to balance their other job-related requirements (Celikten, 2001; Gurley et al., 2015; Hilliard & Newsome, 2013).

Qualitative Data

The scholar-practitioners collected qualitative data throughout the improvement initiative, including focus group transcripts, a presession journal, journal entries after each session, and a post-professional-development journal entry. The scholar-practitioners used a double-blind in vivo coding strategy to extrapolate meaning from participant qualitative data because it is best suited to find meaning from the exact words of participants, especially those from a unique population or specific culture (Manning & Kunkel, 2014). For this research, the specific culture was assistant principals in educational leadership. The scholar-practitioners wanted to capture and preserve the perspective of participants, given the universality of specific educational leadership language and its applicability to a variety of contexts.

The coding process was completed by both scholar-practitioners independent of input from one another to promote objectivity. In vivo coding revealed nine themes based on participant learning about various instructional influences: (a) professional growth, (b) critical conversations, (c) modeling and coaching, (d) standards and instruction, (e) professional learning communities, (f) professional development, (g) observations, (h) feedback and reflection, and (i) culture. The scholar-practitioners organized these nine

themes based on participant response frequency from each journal entry date (see Table 10). Each theme represents common, industry-specific terminology within K–12 educational leadership. At times, exact wording of each theme was not specifically used by participants; in these cases, the scholar-practitioners organized similar terms and phrases under the most used phrase. For example, many participants used “difficult conversations,” “crucial conversations,” or “critical conversations” to describe the kind of conversations necessary between administrators and teachers. These instances were all organized under the theme of critical conversations, as the scholar-practitioners determined that term best captured the overall theme. Each theme is discussed in the subsequent sections, using participant numbers to protect the identities of participants.

Table 10

Themes Identified in Participant Journals

Date	Session topic	PG	CC	M/C	S/I	PLC	PD	O	F/R	Cu	Completed
Up to 7/8/2021	Presession journal	38	4	0	8	3	8	0	0	9	38
7/8/2021	Teacher–student relationships	6	5	12	5	1	6	3	6	20	33
7/15/2021	Classroom discussions	3	2	19	8	5	4	3	8	4	30
7/20/2021	Teacher clarity	3	7	5	14	7	5	10	4	0	28
7/28/2021	Collective teacher efficacy	0	0	0	4	23	12	2	4	5	26
8/4/2021	Evaluation and reflection	15	0	0	6	1	0	0	3	9	2
8/11/2021	Feedback	9	18	5	1	0	0	3	9	2	23
10/10/2021	Post-PD journal	8	10	0	12	8	4	12	14	4	23
Total		82	46	41	58	48	45	39	57	44	223
Percentage		36.77	20.63	18.39	26.01	21.52	20.18	17.49	25.56	19.73	

Note. PG = Professional Growth; CC = Critical Conversations; M/C = Modeling/Coaching; S/I = Standards/Instruction; PLC = Professional Learning Communities; PD = Professional Development; O = Observations; F/R = Feedback/Reflection; Cu = Culture.

Professional Growth

The first theme identified was professional growth. In general, participants conveyed a sense of relief at being freed from managerial tasks. Participant 31 used the term "burden" when describing managerial responsibilities such as "transportation and bus issues" and "test administrations." The opportunity to participate in professional development focused on improving instructional leadership was considered empowering. Participant 3 echoed this sentiment by expressing gratitude for reminders of "best practices that [they] haven't been focusing on." Participants were excited about the prioritization and orientation of their professional practice toward instructional leadership and able to articulate why they felt this way. For example, Participant 25 embraced these professional learning opportunities as opportunities to gain more confidence and cited her belief that her professional growth would improve her ability to "communicate with teachers and staff," which she perceived as a way to assist teacher growth.

Participants viewed professional growth as a critically missing part of their professional practice. Participants 10, 27, and 29 captured this feeling in their sentiments, conveying they needed professional growth related to instructional leadership to become "more well-rounded" and "complete" administrators. These participants' responses captured their understanding that professional action regarding instruction is important but can be pushed aside for other responsibilities.

The conviction among participants that professional growth is necessary demonstrated assistant principals' collective belief that they can and should make a positive impact on the quality of teaching and learning for all students and teachers. This belief is tied directly to the concept of collective efficacy, but, instead of collective

teacher efficacy, the scholar-practitioners have named this phenomenon *collective administrator efficacy*. Although it remains to be seen if collective administrator efficacy carries the same degree of instructional influence as collective teacher efficacy, this manifestation is one of significance that should be studied in greater depth.

Critical Conversations

Using participant responses, the scholar-practitioners defined the next theme, critical conversations, as difficult conversations leaders may attempt to avoid because they are uncomfortable, especially when they are about a teacher's practice. Participant 12 understood the learning session about feedback, which included content about critical conversations, as a call to action, indicating despite typically avoiding "difficult conversations," she "has to become more comfortable" having them if she wants to earn a principal position. Participant 11 shared, "Tough conversations are tough, but both sides can benefit." Speaking to benefits of having critical conversations, Participant 38 expressed for teachers and students to "achieve any sort of growth, a crucial conversation is needed" so that incremental improvements can result in "big gains."

Other participants shared critical conversations lead to gains for both teachers and students. Participant 24 asserted, "[Critical] conversations with teachers is also a major factor in successful classrooms." According to Participant 8, however, "teachers can be some of the most difficult to give feedback to," and assistant principals who work to "foster . . . conversations with teachers" will encourage teachers' professional growth. Overall, participants valued their involvement in critical conversations as part of the professional growth process. Districts should consider taking intentional time to train

their assistant principals in having critical conversations to improve their confidence and effectiveness as administrators.

Modeling and Coaching

The next theme to emerge was modeling and coaching. Participants widely considered their role as instructional leaders as one necessitating teacher coaching to promote more positive instructional outcomes. Hitting at the heart of assistant principals' need to set expectations through action, Participant 29 shared, "We must model what we expect and eliminate barriers [for teachers]." However, required managerial tasks, at times, become barriers between assistant principals and instructional leadership. Calling on all assistant principals to "spend more time focusing on coaching teachers," Participant 12 specifically cited managerial duties as what must be overcome. Each learning session included specific strategies for participants to employ in their own practice, and the sense of urgency among participants to model these strategies for teachers was palpable. Participants 1, 7, 14, and 34 articulated concrete steps for "modeling," "collaboration," "employing authentic assessments," "writing for processing," and conducting "positive classroom discussions" as part of their work with teachers upon their return to school and throughout the school year.

Participants' confidence regarding modeling and coaching also appeared to improve. Citing the clarity of the strategies offered to participants, Participant 31 shared his clear understanding of "how to approach a teacher" who is struggling. Setting "clear expectations" is an important part of the mentoring and coaching process for assistant principals, according to Participant 32. Emphasizing "specific modeling," Participant 11

shared how a high level of clarity in the modeling process for teachers will "help teachers work through" the process of reaching their goals.

Participants viewed modeling and coaching as necessary for instructional improvements and relationships. Participant 5 shared assistant principals should "personalize" feedback to teachers when coaching them. Participant 29 said assistant principals should "model to teachers the importance of building relationships." Modeling positive relationships was an expectation mentioned by several participants. Participants 15, 20, 24, and 25 specifically expressed the need for assistant principals to model positive relationships because, as Participant 15 noted, meeting the "basic needs" of both teachers and students is a requirement for teaching and learning.

Standards and Instruction

The scholar-practitioners also identified standards and instruction as another participant response theme. Participant responses demonstrated a collective belief instructional leadership is tied to assistant principals' and teachers' understanding of standards. Suggesting a collaborative approach to "unpacking standards" by assistant principals and teachers, Participant 35 perceived this work would provide teachers with "more clarity" in their teaching practice and empower administrators to "be more strategic" in how they coach teachers, regardless of instructional background. A common understanding of standards between assistant principals and teachers is critical to set "teachers and their students up for success," according to Participant 22, who also noted being intentional about collaboratively unpacking standards would put teachers and administrators on the same page and provide a high level of "clarity in what will be looked for" during walkthroughs and formal feedback processes.

Clarity was a strongly valued concept among participants. Participants articulated appreciation for the level of clarity during professional development sessions and demonstrated confidence in working with teachers to encourage an equally high level of clarity during instruction. These factors not only demonstrate that teacher clarity is a high yield instructional influence for students, but also for adult learners as well.

Participants also articulated holding teachers accountable to teaching their standards was a necessity for instructional leadership. Participant 16 shared making time to "ensure teachers are teaching to the standards" and providing quality instruction and assessment for students is "of the utmost importance." To support this work, Participant 26 stated assistant principals need to know how to provide teachers with "protected time to unpack the standards" to catalyze stronger instruction and "drive student learning." Participant 1 similarly shared assistant principals should take time to work with teachers to both "understand and plan using the standards" to provide greater clarity and more positive outcomes for teachers and students. Participants believed assistant principals have a multifaceted responsibility about teaching standards that includes expecting teachers to teach their standards, protecting time for teachers to break down their standards, and forming a shared understanding with teachers of what students should know and what teachers should teach. These elements of assistant principal instructional responsibilities represent a substantial time commitment and require assistant principals to balance them alongside other job responsibilities.

Professional Learning Communities

Building from the emphasis on a collaborative approach between assistant principals and teachers about standards and instruction, the next theme was professional

learning communities (PLCs). PLCs are groups or teams of teachers who meet regularly to collaborate about standards, content delivery, and use data collection to improve teaching practice along with student outcomes (DuFour, 2004). Participants agreed assistant principals should be engaged in collaborative learning with teachers while also encouraging and protecting collaborative learning between teachers.

Citing the need to build stronger PLCs in her school, Participant 1 felt a personal responsibility to "change the mindset of [her] teachers about planning together" so that they can "increase the learning capacity of the students." Participants expressed a sense of urgency and unique ownership in leading the improvement of the PLCs in their schools. Feeling her school was "far behind" in having healthy PLCs, Participant 38 expressed, although their PLCs "only speak data about three times per year," it was her responsibility to get them "back on track." Participants consistently articulated PLCs as a school-wide area for improvement while continuing to acknowledge their own responsibility to lead those improvements.

Participants also connected PLC improvement to collective teacher efficacy. In describing the establishment of strong PLCs as the foundation to building collective teacher efficacy, Participant 5 described PLCs as "an ongoing process" involving commitment from assistant principals and teachers to yield effective outcomes for teachers and students. Participant 35 summarized the required commitment of assistant principals to see this work through in their schools:

> The work needed to move teachers and students [forward] will happen as the professional learning community process is refined and committed to. The process is ongoing, and it is not going to occur in one setting. Administration,

teachers, and staff have to be committed to this work in order to see great gains in their school improvement.

Participant 35's response captured several items of note. First, CTE growth requires the commitment of all involved; this participant articulated this point tied to shared responsibility. Participant 35 was not pointing the proverbial finger at their principal to make this work happen but acknowledging all internal stakeholders must play a role to see the greatest possible outcomes for both teachers and students. The question remains as to whether assistant principals feel adequately prepared to lead effectively in this work.

Professional Development

Professional development emerged as another theme from participant responses. Participants shared the impact professional development had on them and their professional practice. As with other themes, participants shared a sense of urgency to apply their learning from the sessions with others in their schools and in their own practice. Participant 28, who self-identified as "an administrator early in her career," said she experienced a "wealth of information" from each session, "looked forward to sharing" session information with her administrative team, and "hoped more [sessions] are available in the future." Citing the immediate applicability of the professional development sessions, Participant 36 discussed not only how participating in professional development empowered her to "reflect upon [her] own practice" in new ways, but also how she had applied the learning from each session to empower teachers "to meet and plan together." Other participants also experienced an increased sense of motivation for personal improvement from the professional development sessions. Speaking specifically

to increased self-motivation, Participant 38 shared, “because of the professional development, I have challenged myself” to grow and become a more effective instructional leader.

The impact professional development has on assistant principals can be immediately positive and catalyze growth, especially when it is designed specifically for them. Participant 1 shared her experience with each session as “timely” and provided “a different lens to view issues that [she was] dealing with.” Participant 21 shared, “I have seen a change in my ability” to lead teachers and improve instruction, also noting she felt “more confident” in handling difficult instructional situations. Participant 8 laid out a plan to use what she had learned to “help teachers build capacity in their classrooms.” Similarly, Participant 20 identified “the most notable change” in her professional practice resulting from the professional development was how “aware” she felt to create ways to give more meaningful feedback to teachers.

The impact of professional development as described by participants related directly back to what they perceived as ways of improving instruction in their schools for teachers and students. However, Participant 1 captured the precarious situation of assistant principals, noting she never wished to “jump into anything without a plan for success.” Yet, that is the risk districts take when they do not prepare their assistant principals for instructional leadership responsibilities. Schools do not need their assistant principals to be perfect, but schools and districts have a professional imperative to ensure there is intentionality behind professional development for assistant principals that supports their professional growth beyond managerial tasks for their current positions and for their future positions as principals.

Observations

Participants shared several comments about observations, which was the next theme identified by the scholar-practitioners. The identification of this theme should not be surprising, given observations are a normal part of instructional leadership requirements of school administrators and one of the elements participants most closely associated with instructional leadership activities. Observations were also one of the more polarizing instructional leadership activities due to participants' perceptions that ineffective administrators do a poor job of conducting observations.

Participant 13 lamented this issue, stating observations are often "something else that teachers and administrators check off as just another hoop to jump through," wanting them instead to "mean something to [her], the teachers, and more importantly the students." Assistant principal participants wanted to be agents of instructional improvement in their schools, and as this participant noted, formal opportunities to work with teachers for improvement are too often simply "checked off" in favor of spending time on other matters. Participant desire is not enough; districts and state educational leaders need to prioritize formal preparation of assistant principals to maximize their effectiveness and promote improved outcomes for teachers and students.

Even one professional development session can make a clear difference in participants' confidence to conduct higher quality observations. Sharing about her improved confidence, Participant 28 conveyed as she conducts observations, she will be able to "take the information gained and look deeper at instruction in the classrooms." Her perceived increase in instructional leadership capacity and confidence was not unique. Participant 14 shared she felt more prepared to conduct meaningful observations

that build teacher "capacity through growth and reflection on meaningful teaching practices." Participant 18, who self-identified as "a new assistant principal," also expressed increased confidence and clarity and noted, after the sessions, she knew "what is expected" and what "tools to use" to conduct meaningful observations of teachers.

The desire to engage in meaningful observation processes was shared among participants, but so was their universal lack of preparedness. Noting the prevalent lack of information on effective observation practices, Participant 7 shared even the evaluation tools used to document observations were "never explained." Discussing one of the sessions, which included an explanation the NCEES evaluation tool used in North Carolina to formally document teacher observations, Participant 24 shared, up until that point, she had "never heard" a clear explanation of how to use the NCEES tool, and the session "demystified" many of her misunderstandings. Participant 24's response was concerning; there should be no myths or mystery surrounding formal evaluative tools used to assess professional educators. Yet, as participants repeatedly articulated, no universal understanding exists for such tools, and no common training exists for educators.

Feedback and Reflection

The next theme identified by the scholar-practitioners was feedback and reflection, which were an extension of the observation process. As with observation, participants closely associated feedback to teachers and reflection as directly relating to instructional leadership. Although working in tandem with the observation process, the scholar-practitioners felt feedback and reflection warranted their own section.

Participants widely valued high-quality feedback. As Participant 18 stated, "intentional feedback is important" and should always be "safe, timely, and constructive." Echoing the same sentiment, Participant 26 shared, "effective feedback is essential" and should be "specific, data-based, constructive, positive, honest, and open." Specifically, feedback is "an essential part of the school's success," according to Participant 35, who shared effective feedback can "create an atmosphere where all staff members can grow." Reiterating feedback as an essential function of instructional leadership, Participant 38 shared, "I need to give meaningful feedback more often to my teachers." In describing this instructional leadership function as a need, this participant highlighted the urgency that should exist around preparing assistant principals to lead instruction.

Participants wanted to provide meaningful feedback and clear expectations to teachers, but they also craved similar feedback and clarity about their own practice. Participants expressed a desire to experience the same kind of benefits they believed teachers got from effective feedback and opportunities to reflect. Noting the value of reflection, Participant 4 shared his realization that having opportunities to reflect on his own practice based on feedback had led to a "change in my ability" to reach "realistic goals." Participant 31 pointedly stated, "I really need to take the time and demand feedback on my performance." As with the other sessions, participants articulated a sense of urgency to apply their learning to others and to themselves. Participants were not afraid of receiving critical feedback, as they viewed it as an essential part of the growth process. Participant 28 knew "feedback is imperative to growth," further sharing her personal understanding of how it feels to be a teacher who is "thirsting for feedback and

never getting it." More time and resources must be given to cultivating high-level assistant principals who are trained in how to lead instruction while balancing other demanding tasks, and educational leaders must take the time to consider formal structures for how to provide meaningful feedback to assistant principals to maximize their leadership potential.

Culture

The final theme to emerge from participant responses was culture. The scholar-practitioners defined culture as shared beliefs, goals, and identities among a school's staff and students. Participants all wanted to experience a strong school culture. Many participants connected their desire for a positive school culture with their own desires for growth as leaders. In particular, the scholar-practitioners found several participants connected their desire to grow with the necessity of being relationship oriented to promote a stronger culture in their schools.

Keeping relationships at the core of work in education, Participant 38 described relationships as "the most important aspect" of work with teachers and students. Similarly, Participant 35 expressed their relationships with teachers and students were "the key to a successful school culture," and went on to state assistant principals must "remain student–teacher relationship focused" to yield the best possible outcomes for teachers and students. In agreement, Participant 1 not only described a culture of positive relationships as the first step to "any serious academic work," but also shared her belief that positive relationships cultivate a cycle of pride in self and pride in school that empowers students to thrive. Culture and relationships go hand in hand, according to Participants 9 and 11, who both likened positive school culture to a brand students

identify with and provides them with a “sense of belonging” that promotes “school spirit” and “common goals.”

The connection participants made between relationships and culture was significant. It served to reinforce the notion administrator–teacher relationships may be as vital to instructional success as teacher–student relationships, as outlined by Hattie (2015). According to Participant 4, positive relationships “can be leveraged to improve the experience of all students.” Schools that “take the time to celebrate small and big things” through positive relationships with students will thrive, in Participant 7’s view. He went on to share it was “easy to get wrapped up in daily management and not take the time to celebrate” students and teachers, but it was the responsibility of assistant principals to ensure relationships remained a priority. In stating this, Participant 7 articulated another way perceived positive and necessary actions are easily not addressed due to lack of time and competing responsibilities viewed as tedious or unconnected to culture building. Assistant principal participants felt a great sense of responsibility for the entirety of a school’s success and outcomes. This sense of responsibility among participants reinforces the scholar-practitioners’ position that assistant principals share an equal burden of leadership with school principals beyond managerial tasks.

Focus Groups

The scholar-practitioners conducted two focus groups to collect qualitative data. The first focus group took place before any sessions had been completed. The second focus group took place after all sessions had been completed. The scholar-practitioners transcribed the full audio of both focus groups using an application called Otter.ai. The question protocol for both focus groups can be found in Appendix D.

As with the other qualitative data in this research, in vivo coding of focus group transcripts was completed by both scholar-practitioners independent of input from one another to promote objectivity. In vivo coding revealed three themes based on participant experiences related to on-the-job demands of instructional leadership responsibilities: efficacy, teacher support, and obstacles to instructional leadership. These themes emerged in both pre- and post-learning focus group and were organized based on participant responses (see Table 11). Each theme represents an element of participants' collective professional beliefs about their positions related to their instructional leadership responsibilities and preparedness as assistant principals. The scholar-practitioners discuss each theme in the following sections and use participant letters to protect the identities of participants.

Table 11

Themes Identified in Focus Groups

Date	Focus group	E	TS	OTIL
7/7/2021	Prelearning	50	32	43
10/12/2021	Postlearning	45	25	28
	Total	95	57	71

Note: E = Efficacy, TS = Teacher Support, OTIL = Obstacles to Instructional Leadership

Efficacy

The first theme to emerge from the focus group data was efficacy. Participants in both focus groups discussed their desire and drive to grow their capacity to effectively lead instruction in their schools. Select participant quotations about efficacy can be viewed in Table 12 and reflect the wider participant sentiments related to efficacy. For

this analysis, the scholar-practitioners define *efficacy* as participants' desire to grow and improve their professional practice, specifically related to instructional leadership. Focus group participants expressed strong sentiments about their perceived need to develop as instructional leaders. Participants clearly conveyed opportunities for growth were not only desired but expected. Data from both pre- and post-learning focus groups demonstrated a strong orientation toward instructional leadership among assistant principal participants.

Table 12

Efficacy Excerpts From Focus Groups

Participant	Focus group	Quotation
Participant A	Prelearning	"For me, if I want to grow in that area, I'm gonna have to find opportunities like this."
Participant C	Prelearning	"We want to grow more as leaders. We need to grow."
Participant E	Postlearning	"I didn't get a lot of feedback, and I always begged for it because I wanted to grow more."

Participants entered the professional development sessions clearly aware of the need to improve their capacity to lead instruction in their schools. In other words, it was not the professional development sessions that sparked their collective desire to positively effect instruction in their schools. Rather, the sessions were a vehicle for gaining an instructional leadership skillset that contributed to their existing desire for growth. Assistant principals want to be better administrators and expect to be catalysts for positive instructional outcomes for teachers and students in their schools. These

expectations can be easily satisfied by providing assistant principals with targeted professional growth opportunities.

Teacher Support

The second theme to emerge was teacher support. Teacher support represents a key reason fueling participants' desire for growth. Unanimously, participants clarified they desired professional growth to be better equipped to serve and support teachers, with the goal of producing greater learning outcomes for students. A selection of participant quotations about teacher support that represent the wider participant pool can be viewed in Table 13.

Table 13

Teacher Support Excerpts From Focus Groups

Participant	Focus group	Quotation
Participant B	Prelearning	"[Instructional leadership means] helping teachers…figuring out their craft and how to best teach their content, and trying to help lead them in finding good strategies for their students."
Participant D	Prelearning	"I would say [instructional leadership] is being able to provide support. As far as instruction for teachers, that will lead to a greater impact in the classroom."
Participant E	Postlearning	"Long term, when you look at the big picture, if you were able to help a teacher be effective by implementing some of these strategies and impact kids, that ripples, if that makes sense… [instructional leadership] is number one in my book because you're trying to impact your school, your teachers, your culture, and your students with the instructional piece and help everybody grow by helping them."
Participant G	Postlearning	"I loved impacting kids, but the idea that we could impact more and…help teachers become better, it is the number one reason why I stepped out of the classroom."

Participants collectively believed effective instructional leadership meant improving the outcomes of students by improving the instructional delivery of teachers. Participants perceived teachers as the most significant adult influence on student instructional outcomes and framed assistant principals as having a similar responsibility to influence teacher outcomes. In the same way participants expected teachers to cultivate learning for students, they viewed their roles as supportive ones in which they worked alongside teachers rather than simply managing them as employees. Assistant principals perceived their roles as distinctively more support oriented than managerial. This orientation is logical given participants passionately spoke of reasons they served in assistant principal roles and frequently cited their strong desires to improve their practice to better serve others. Conspicuously absent from their responses was the desire to grow in managerial tasks.

Obstacles to Instructional Leadership

The final theme to emerge from the focus groups emphasized participants' perceived obstacles to instructional leadership. Although participants expressed strong desires for professional growth to better serve teachers, participants easily articulated ways such growth was inhibited. They communicated a list of perceived barriers preventing assistant principals from embodying the kind of instructional leadership they desired in their schools. The selected quotations about these obstacles in Table 14 provide a strong summary of wider participant sentiments related to these barriers.

Table 14

Obstacles to Instructional Leadership Excerpts From Focus Groups

Participant	Focus group	Quotation
Participant A	Prelearning	"I think…[instructional leadership is] very important, unfortunately not necessarily something that I'm allowed or in position to devote as much time to as I want. With the behavior issues and things like that that I'm primarily dealing with throughout the day, I think that being able to get in the classrooms more often is a big objective for me this coming school year."
Participant B	Prelearning	"I can see the problem with, you know, administrators making other things that priority. I think that sometimes within instructional leadership comes hard conversations. And I think that some people shy away from the hard conversations or haven't ever had the opportunity to and haven't taught how to have a hard conversation. So, therefore, it's easy to not make it a priority."
Participant C	Prelearning	"I loved [my MSA program] but I feel like there was stuff the program was missing…specifically instructional leadership. It would have been nice to actually look at evaluations and the teacher evaluation tool as well as how to effectively use it…we didn't look at how we would evaluate teachers. And so, I think that it's kind of a trial by fire."
Participant D	Prelearning	"The building, the buses, the discipline, the other responsibilities in that dimension, and the central office calling you at the last minute to say, 'Hey, I need XYZ,' means you've got to stop what you're doing to make that happen. . . . I get off my schedule."
Participant E	Postlearning	"There are a lot of things that with discipline and everything else that can get in the way of [instructional leadership]."
Participant G	Postlearning	"Discipline can get in the way [of instructional leadership] . . . testing plans get in the way [of instructional leadership] . . . your schedule can get in the way [of instructional leadership] . . . buses can get in the way [of instructional leadership]."

During the initial focus group, participants did not express confidence in their ability to make instructional leadership a top priority. Assistant principals all have

instructional responsibilities, both formally and informally, but focus group participants reported a lack of confidence, preparation, or ability to balance priorities stand in the way of being good instructional leaders. Focus group participants also shared about the challenge of finding balance between instructional leadership and other job priorities and consistently shared a strong sense of value for instructional leadership and their responsibility to prioritize it.

Participants in the second focus group expressed more concern about priorities that compete with instructional leadership for supremacy, unlike participants in the first focus group, who accepted the obstacles as simple facts of the assistant principal position. Although managerial tasks such as discipline, buses, and testing dominated the list of perceived obstacles to instructional leadership, some participants also spoke about their administrative preparation processes.

Participants agreed their districts did not do enough to prepare assistant principals to lead instruction and asserted university training programs are not oriented toward preparing assistant principal candidates for the realities of administrative positions. Participants also universally agreed more should be done by universities to prepare assistant principals to lead instruction in their schools, which were sentiments expressed in both the first and second focus groups. One notable exception was Participant E, who shared his district had recently started a cohort for aspiring administrators. The cohort helped acclimate potential assistant principals to instructional leadership and what Participant E referred to as "situational leadership," through which cohort participants practiced responses to critical leadership scenarios in monthly sessions.

Focus group participants wanted authentic, frequent conversations about content with takeaways that were applicable to the real scenarios they faced daily. It is unreasonable to expect assistant principals to live up to their instructional potential unless school leaders, districts, and university training programs are willing to provide them with real-world instructional leadership guidance that matches the actual demands of their positions.

Discussion

Assistant principals are positioned to serve greater instructional means in schools than just disciplinary and managerial tasks. Despite being perfectly poised to catalyze positive instructional outcomes, Assistant principals are widely underused for leading instruction in their schools. Assistant principals have instructional responsibilities, even if they have not been prepared to positively impact instruction, and therefore do not have a neutral impact on instruction. Instead, they impact instruction every day, for better or worse. If meaningful preparation is not made available to these administrators, districts should accept assistant principal impact on instruction will be more negative than positive.

Providing professional development on instructional leadership designed specifically for assistant principals that includes relevant, tangible learning strategies immediately applicable in real-world professional practice yielded instructional leadership capacity gains for participants. The results demonstrated by this improvement initiative can be replicated in future initiatives. Additionally, effective professional development does not have to come at a high cost to districts nor require the expertise of individuals outside the district's existing leadership. As intended, this study provided a

replicable outline of instructional leadership professional development for assistant principals that does not require districts to use resources beyond their existing expenditures.

The scholar-practitioners outlined short- and long-term goals for this research as part of their conceptual framework (see Figure 5). Results indicated the short-term goals were met because assistant principal participants experienced increased instructional leadership capacity. This capacity increase was coupled with an increase in participants' confidence in engaging in instructional leadership activities. Data demonstrated participants also expanded their understanding of John Hattie's instructional influences and articulated ways they planned to apply their learning to their own professional practice. It is unclear at this time whether assistant principal participants' learning will yield more positive instructional outcomes for teachers and students in their schools, as student outcome data would be needed to assess that goal, which was beyond the scope of this project. The scholar-practitioners' long-term goals remain unchanged, but more data would be needed to determine if these goals were achieved.

Sustainability

The structure and intentionality behind these professional development sessions were vital to realize short-term participant goals. Every aspect of the professional development initiative is replicable across district and school contexts. The sessions provided worked around participants' schedules and availability to make the learning accessible to more participants. Sessions were provided to participants at no cost by using the expertise of school administrators working in the field of public education, demonstrating every district can use the expertise of its internal leaders to promote

greater instructional leadership capacity among assistant principals. Providing similar professional development for assistant principals is sustainable, renewable, adaptable to fit other elements of instructional leadership learning, and implementable at any desired frequency.

Geographic Diversity

The research conducted in this study included participants from across the state of North Carolina who serve as assistant principals in a variety of geographic regions (e.g., mountains, Piedmont, coastal plain) and a variety of community and school contexts (e.g., rural, suburban, urban). Specifically, participants in this study represented 15 different counties across the state of North Carolina, yet participants shared the same desire to effectively lead instruction in their schools and the same yearning for professional development that would prepare them to have the greatest possible impact on the teachers and students they serve. It is worth noting the strong regional diversity of participants in this study despite the scholar-practitioners' use of third-party means of inviting participation. The regional education consortiums shared they do not communicate directly with individual school-based administrators but usually use email lists of regional district leaders. The level of regional representation from across the state of North Carolina and community contexts demonstrated, in part, there were many educational leaders who recognized the need for professional development focused on assistant principals.

Shared Responsibilities of Universities and School Districts

Educational leaders should be prepared for the whole of their jobs by university training programs and school districts; unfortunately, this is not the case for many

aspiring administrators. In an era when testing accountability and student outcomes are at the forefront of education, it seems counterproductive for institutions to overlook a clear opportunity to catalyze instructional growth in their schools. There are more assistant principals than principals in most school contexts, and assistant principals often have the same instructional responsibilities as their principals for observations, formal feedback, and teacher growth in addition to various operational job responsibilities necessary for the operation of their schools. Yet, there is often no support and no intentional preparation to help assistant principals serve effectively in their roles, much less increase capacity to lead the most important, which is instruction in their schools.

Elements of Notable Growth

Assistant principals in this study demonstrated notable growth in confidence related to activities that influence instruction and frequency engaging in such activities. Their quantitative improvements specifically related to collective teacher efficacy and teacher clarity were particularly interesting. As previously noted, collective teacher efficacy has the highest effect size (ES = 1.57) on student learning (Visible Learning, 2017) and is defined as the shared belief by teachers that they make a difference in the academic outcomes of students beyond the influences of students' homes and community (Tschannen-Moran & Barr, 2004). The fact collective teacher efficacy represents the shared belief structure in schools should not be understated. Assistant principals in this study developed a greater understanding of their role in cultivating the collective beliefs of teachers in their schools and did not believe this work was only for the principal of the school; they saw themselves as poised and obligated to lead collective improvements among teachers to benefit all students.

The scholar-practitioners believe improvements in participant understanding of the six Hattie (2015) instructional influences, most notably teacher clarity, resulted directly from the level of clarity provided through the professional development sessions about how to lead instruction in each of the selected instructional influences. Participants repeatedly articulated the importance of modeling and providing for teachers in the same way they expect teachers to interact with students. Districts and university training programs would be remiss if they did not consider this implication when designing professional development for assistant principals.

The scholar-practitioners identified a problem of practice in education in the form of gap in instructional leadership capacity among assistant principals. In this study, the scholar-practitioners outlined an improvement initiative to address this problem in education. District leaders may not choose to accept the challenge of using assistant principals to improve instruction in their schools, but until assistant principals are used for their instructional potential as much or more than they are used for managerial tasks, student and teacher outcomes will never reach their maximum potential.

Challenges

The scholar-practitioners faced notable challenges during the implementation of this research due to realities of the COVID-19 global pandemic. The professional learning sessions were originally intended to be in a face-to-face format, but the threat of virus transmission made this impossible. On the advice of the design team, the scholar-practitioners shifted the mode of implementation to an all-virtual format. Neither of the scholar-practitioners had organized or led professional development sessions in a virtual format prior to this implementation, which required learning quickly.

Another challenge was participant attendance at the professional development sessions. Despite strong attendance at the first session, participants began notifying the scholar-practitioners as early as the 2nd week that they would miss sessions. Participants began asking if they should leave the study or if they could continue participation by watching recordings of the sessions and keeping up with journals for any missed sessions. On the advice of the design team, the scholar-practitioners secured approval from the Internal Review Board at Western Carolina University to share session recordings as needed to allow participants to continue to engage in learning asynchronously. Offering sessions in this format led to sustained attendance and engagement among participants.

Prior to the implementation of this work, the scholar-practitioners had never met most of the session presenters. Given face-to-face meetings were ill advised during the COVID-19 global pandemic, the scholar-practitioners worked virtually to get to know the speakers and establish consistency for the purpose of this work. Because the scholar-practitioners and speakers all worked in different school districts, establishing a unified vision for each session was more challenging than if all involved already worked together in the same district context.

Recommendations

The scholar-practitioners have recommendations for universities and districts, future implementers of similar professional development sessions, and future researchers. University training programs, school districts, and future researchers should consider the mode of implementation of professional development. Participants in this study all participated virtually, some synchronously and some asynchronously. Although the original intention of this implementation was to have all participants learning in person,

the shift to a virtual format and offering an asynchronous learning option increased the accessibility of the learning for participants from across the state. Participants in this study frequently noted in journal responses their plans to go back and rewatch session recordings to develop a greater understanding of the content. Educators see this time and again when students miss a day of school and are afforded opportunities to catch up on what they miss. If the content is valuable, it is valuable enough to make sure students have an opportunity to access it. Those involved in training future administrators should learn from the positive but unintended consequences of this mode of implementation and build flexibility into professional development from the start that allows participants to learn at their own pace as needed.

The scholar-practitioners have several recommendations for any educational leaders considering implementing this work in their districts. First, 6 consecutive weeks of 90-minute professional development sessions may not be practical for the busy schedules of assistant principals in most districts. The scholar-practitioners believe a more palatable implementation schedule would be one session per month. Second, the 90-minute learning sessions seemed appropriate for the content and virtual format, but if face-to-face learning had been possible, each session would have emphasized more collaborative learning opportunities. Third, although the scholar-practitioners maintain the belief that face-to-face, in-person learning is superior to virtual formats, districts should ensure participants can connect virtually, whether synchronously or asynchronously, when critical learning opportunities are provided.

Future researchers should consider collecting data through additional means to expand this work, and the scholar-practitioners specifically recommend collecting more

quantitative data between sessions. In this study, the quantitative measures could have been introduced to participants between each session, which would have yielded greater insight into how each individual session impacted participants. Additionally, researchers should consider implementing similar studies during the school year instead of during the summer. Changing the timeline would give participants the opportunity to apply their learning between sessions instead of waiting until the school year starts. Being able to apply learning without delay may yield more fruitful opportunities for both quantitative and qualitative data collection between sessions.

Limitations

The scholar-practitioners recognize professional development is unlikely to be implemented through an all-virtual format in the future. The virtual format limited participants' opportunities for collaborative learning. Participants were able to engage in breakout rooms during the virtual learning sessions, but this may not have yielded the same results as if participants were in person. Additionally, although it is recommended for districts to use the expertise of local administrative leaders during future professional development for assistant principals, the speakers for learning sessions in this study came from across the state of North Carolina and agreed to lead sessions free of charge. Although the scholar-practitioners believe the participant outcomes from this study are valuable, the replicability of the outcomes through in-person professional development sessions may not be possible.

Another limiting factor was attrition among participants during implementation of the sessions. It is unknown why certain participants elected not to continue with the professional development sessions. It could have been due to their schedules being too

busy, they did not feel the learning was relevant or helpful, or other factors. The scholar-practitioners did not follow up with participants who discontinued participation to understand why they left the study.

Summary Statement

School districts may be missing out on a critical resource for instructional improvements in their schools. It is common to think assistant principals should shoulder the burden of managerial tasks in their schools, but they are still also responsible for a substantial level of instructional leadership tasks (Hilliard & Newsome, 2013). Preparing assistant principals to serve effectively as instructional leaders can yield both immediate and long-term benefits for teachers and students. By prioritizing instructional leadership capacity building for assistant principals, districts can take a step toward improving outcomes for all students. This improvement initiative demonstrated assistant principals can be prepared in a way that will help close the kinds of gaps that exist between teacher evaluation ratings and student outcomes. Assistant principals who are more prepared to lead instruction can more accurately capture what is happening in classrooms during instruction and give feedback and ratings more in line with actual teacher impact in every classroom.

The larger implication of this work is instructionally sound assistant principals can go on to become instructionally sound principals. District leaders would be wise to consider the ways in which they can recruit, mentor, and continue to train new assistant principals for their positions to achieve a continuous cycle of instructional success among the administrative ranks in their systems. Stronger instructional leadership preparation for assistant principals can yield stronger outcomes for teachers and students, both now and

in the future. These goals can be accomplished by using the expertise and experience of current district leaders and can be implemented with little impact to existing district budgets. Normalizing such structures can mitigate negative impacts of administrative turnover, make districts more attractive to stronger candidates, and create a culture of instructional excellence that defines schools, districts, and communities.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

NCEES Teacher Standard IV

Standard IV: Teachers facilitate learning for their students

Observation	Developing	Proficient	Accomplished	Distinguished	Not Demonstrated (Comment Required)
	Element IVa. Teachers know the ways in which learning takes place, and they know the appropriate levels of intellectual, physical, social, and emotional development of their students. Teachers know how students think and learn. Teachers understand the influences that affect individual student learning (development, culture, language proficiency, etc.) and differentiate their instruction accordingly. Teachers keep abreast of evolving research about student learning. They adapt resources to address the strengths and weaknesses of their students.				
✓	☐ Understands developmental levels of students and recognizes the need to differentiate instruction.	. . . and ☐ Understands developmental levels of students and appropriately differentiates instruction.	. . . and ☐ Identifies appropriate developmental levels of students and consistently and appropriately differentiates instruction.	. . . and ☐ Encourages and guides colleagues to adapt instruction to align with students' developmental levels.	
✓		☐ Assesses resources needed to address strengths and weaknesses of students.	☐ Reviews and uses alternative resources or adapts existing resources to take advantage of student strengths or address weaknesses.	☐ Stays abreast of current research about student learning and emerging resources and encourages the school to adopt or adapt them for the benefit of all students.	
	Element IVb. Teachers plan instruction appropriate for their students. Teachers collaborate with their colleagues and use a variety of data sources for short- and long-range planning based on the *North Carolina Standard Course of Study*. These plans reflect an understanding of how students learn. Teachers engage students in the learning process. They understand that instructional plans must be consistently monitored and modified to enhance learning. Teachers make the curriculum responsive to cultural differences and individual learning needs.				
✓	☐ Recognizes data sources important to planning instruction.	. . . and ☐ Uses a variety of data for short- and long-range planning of instruction. Monitors and modifies instructional plans to enhance student learning.	. . . and ☐ Monitors student performance and responds to individual learning needs in order to engage students in learning.	. . . and ☐ Monitors student performance and responds to cultural diversity and learning needs through the school improvement process.	
	Element IVc. Teachers use a variety of instructional methods. Teachers choose the methods and techniques that are most effective in meeting the needs of their students as they strive to eliminate achievement gaps. Teachers employ a wide range of techniques including information and communication technology, learning styles, and differentiated instruction.				
✓	☐ Demonstrates awareness of the variety of methods and materials necessary to meet the needs of all students.	. . . and ☐ Demonstrates awareness or use of appropriate methods and materials necessary to meet the needs of all students.	. . . and ☐ Ensures the success of all students through the selection and utilization of appropriate methods and materials.	. . . and ☐ Stays abreast of emerging research areas and new and innovative materials and incorporates them into lesson plans and instructional strategies.	

Observation	Developing	Proficient	Accomplished	Distinguished	Not Demonstrated (Comment Required)
	Element IVd. Teachers integrate and utilize technology in their instruction. Teachers know when and how to use technology to maximize student learning. Teachers help students use technology to learn content, think critically, solve problems, discern reliability, use information, communicate, innovate, and collaborate.				
✓	☐ Assesses effective types of technology to use for instruction.	. . . and ☐ Demonstrates knowledge of how to utilize technology in instruction.	. . . and ☐ Integrates technology with instruction to maximize student learning.	. . . and ☐ Provides evidence of student engagement in higher level thinking skills through the integration of technology.	
	Element IVe. Teachers help students develop critical-thinking and problem-solving skills. Teachers encourage students to ask questions, think creatively, develop and test innovative ideas, synthesize knowledge, and draw conclusions. They help students exercise and communicate sound reasoning; understand connections; make complex choices; and frame, analyze, and solve problems.				
✓	☐ Understands the importance of developing students' critical thinking and problem solving skills.	. . . and ☐ Demonstrates knowledge of processes needed to support students in acquiring critical thinking skills and problem-solving skills.	. . . and Teaches students the processes needed to: ☐ think creatively and critically, ☐ develop and test innovative ideas, ☐ synthesize knowledge, ☐ draw conclusions, ☐ exercise and communicate sound reasoning, ☐ understand connections, ☐ make complex choices, and ☐ frame, analyze and solve problems.	. . . and ☐ Encourages and assists teachers throughout the school to integrate critical thinking and problem solving skills into their instructional practices.	
	Element IVf. Teachers help students work in teams and develop leadership qualities. Teachers teach the importance of cooperation and collaboration. They organize learning teams in order to help students define roles, strengthen social ties, improve communication and collaborative skills, interact with people from different cultures and backgrounds, and develop leadership qualities.				
✓	☐ Provides opportunities for cooperation, collaboration, and leadership through student learning teams.	. . . and ☐ Organizes student learning teams for the purpose of developing cooperation, collaboration, and student leadership.	. . . and ☐ Encourages students to create and manage learning teams.	. . . and ☐ Fosters the development of student leadership and teamwork skills to be used beyond the classroom.	

Observation	Developing	Proficient	Accomplished	Distinguished	Not Demonstrated (Comment Required)
	Element IVg. Teachers communicate effectively. Teachers communicate in ways that are clearly understood by their students. They are perceptive listeners and are able to communicate with students in a variety of ways even when language is a barrier. Teachers help students articulate thoughts and ideas clearly and effectively.				
✓	☐ Demonstrates the ability to effectively communicate with students.	. . . and ☐ Uses a variety of methods for communication with all students.	. . . and ☐ Creates a variety of methods to communicate with all students.	. . . and ☐ Anticipates possible student misunderstandings and proactively develops teaching techniques to mitigate concerns.	
✓	☐ Provides opportunities for students to articulate thoughts and ideas.	☐ Consistently encourages and supports students to articulate thoughts and ideas clearly and effectively.	☐ Establishes classroom practices which encourage all students to develop effective communication skills.	☐ Establishes school-wide and grade appropriate vehicles to encourage students throughout the school to develop effective communication skills.	
	Element IVh. Teachers use a variety of methods to assess what each student has learned. Teachers use multiple indicators, including formative and summative assessments, to evaluate student progress and growth as they strive to eliminate achievement gaps. Teachers provide opportunities, methods, feedback, and tools for students to assess themselves and each other. Teachers use 21st century assessment systems to inform instruction and demonstrate evidence of students' 21st century knowledge, skills, performance, and dispositions.				
✓	☐ Uses indicators to monitor and evaluate student progress.	. . . and ☐ Uses multiple indicators, both formative and summative, to monitor and evaluate student progress and to inform instruction.	. . . and ☐ Uses the information gained from the assessment activities to improve teaching practice and student learning.	. . . and ☐ Teaches students and encourages them to use peer and self-assessment feedback to assess their own learning.	
✓	☐ Assesses students in the attainment of 21st century knowledge, skills, and dispositions.	☐ Provides evidence that students attain 21st century knowledge, skills and dispositions.	☐ Provides opportunities for students to assess themselves and others.	☐ Encourages and guides colleagues to assess 21st century skills, knowledge, and dispositions and to use the assessment information to adjust their instructional practice.	

Comments:

Examples of Artifacts:

☐ Lesson plans
☐ Display of technology used
☐ Professional development
☐ Use of student learning teams
☐ Documentation of differentiated instruction
☐ Materials used to promote critical thinking and problem solving
☐ Collaborative lesson planning
☐ _____
☐ _____
☐ _____
☐ _____

Appendix B

NCEES Administrator Standard II

Standard 2: Instructional Leadership

Principals set high standards for the professional practice of 21st century instruction and assessment that result in a no-nonsense accountable environment. The school executive must be knowledgeable of best instructional and school practices and must use this knowledge to cause the creation of collaborative structures within the school for the design of highly engaging schoolwork for students, the on-going peer review of this work, and the sharing of this work throughout the professional community.

a. Focus on Learning and Teaching, Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment: The principal leads the discussion about standards for curriculum, instruction and assessment based on research and best practices in order to establish and achieve high expectations for students.

Developing	Proficient	Accomplished	Distinguished	Not Demonstrated (Comment Required)
❑ Collects and analyzes student assessment data in adherence with instructional and legal requirements ❑ Provides students access to a variety of 21st century instructional tools, including technology	. . . and ❑ Systematically focuses on the alignment of learning, teaching, curriculum, instruction, and assessment to maximize student learning ❑ Organizes targeted opportunities for teachers to learn how to teach their subjects well ❑ Ensures that students are provided opportunities to learn and utilize best practices in the integrated use of 21st century instructional tools, including technology, to solve problems	. . . and ❑ Ensures that the alignment of learning, teaching, curriculum, instruction, and assessment is focused to maximize student learning ❑ Creates a culture that it is the responsibility of all staff to make sure that all students are successful	. . . and ❑ Ensures that knowledge of teaching and learning serves as the foundation for the school's professional learning community ❑ Encourages and challenges staff to reflect deeply on, and define, what knowledge, skills and concepts are essential to the complete educational development of students	

b. Focus on Instructional Time: The principal creates processes and schedules which protect teachers from disruption of instructional or preparation time.

❑ Understands the need for teachers to have daily planning time and duty-free lunch periods ❑ Is knowledgeable of designs for age-appropriate school schedules which address the learning needs of diverse student populations	. . . and ❑ Adheres to legal requirements for planning and instructional time ❑ Develops a master schedule to maximize student learning by providing for individual and on-going collaborative planning for every teacher ❑ Designs scheduling processes and protocols that maximize staff input and address diverse student learning needs	. . . and ❑ Ensures that teachers have the legally required amount of daily planning and lunch periods ❑ Routinely and conscientiously implements processes to protect instructional time from interruptions	. . . and ❑ Structures the school schedule to enable all teachers to have individual and team collaborative planning time ❑ Systematically monitors the effect of the master schedule on collaborative planning and student achievement ❑ Ensures that district leadership is informed of the amounts and scheduling of individual and team planning time	

Suggested Artifacts for Standard 2:

- School Improvement Plan
- NC Teacher Working Conditions Survey
- Student achievement and testing data
- Student drop-out data
- Teacher retention data
- Documented use of formative assessment instruments to impact instruction
- Development and communication of goal-oriented personalized education plans for identified students
- Evidence of team development and evaluation of classroom lessons
- Use of research-based practices and strategies in classrooms
- Master school schedule documenting individual and collaborative planning for every teacher

Appendix C

Detailed Implementation Timeline

Building instructional leadership capacity for assistant principals.	May 2021	June 2021	July 2021	August 2021	September 2021	October 2021
Step 1 - Develop design team						
Step 2 - Leaders meet with the design team to discuss POP and next steps for the team.						
Evaluate and update first PDSA cycle						
Step 3 - Design team reconvenes and identifies areas steps for potential theory of improvement for the POP						
Evaluate and update revised PDSA cycle						
Step 4 - Plan professional development and training						
Step 5 - Secure speakers						
Step 6 - Send out registration links and information for professional development						
Send out presurvey to registrants						

Building instructional leadership capacity for assistant principals.	May 2021	June 2021	July 2021	August 2021	September 2021	October 2021
Step 7 - Reconvene design team to finalize all plans for professional development and training						
Evaluate and update revised PDSA cycle						
Step 8 - Conduct presurveys of PIMRS and AP questionnaire						
Step 9 - Reconvene with design team						
Evaluate and update revised PDSA cycle						
Step 10 - Conduct initial focus group						
Step 11 - Conduct initial session of professional development						
Step 12 - Conduct presurvey of Hattie rankings						
Collect qualitative data for process measures						
Step 13 - Conduct second session of professional development						
Collect qualitative data for process measures						
Evaluate and update revised PDSA cycle						

Building instructional leadership capacity for assistant principals.	May 2021	June 2021	July 2021	August 2021	September 2021	October 2021
Step 14 - Conduct third session of professional development						
Collect qualitative data for process measures						
Step 15 - Conduct fourth session of professional development						
Collect qualitative data for process measures						
Step 16 - Allow participants to put training into practice at their schools						
Step 17 - Conduct final professional development and training session						
Collect qualitative data for process measures						
Step 18 - Conduct postsurveys and reflections						
Step 19 - Analyze quantitative data						
Step 20 - Conduct final focus group						
Step 21 - Analyze qualitative data						

Appendix D

Focus Group Questions

1. What is instructional leadership?
2. What are common characteristics of administrators you know who you believe to be effective instructional leaders?
3. What are the top things you look for when conducting a classroom observation?
4. How familiar are you with the work of John Hattie and instructional effect sizes?
5. How important is instructional leadership compared to other administrative responsibilities?
6. What are the main challenges that might prevent an administrator from serving as an effective instructional leader?
7. Whose job is it to prepare an administrator to be an effective instructional leader?
8. Do you believe that your LEA effectively prepares administrators to be instructional leaders?
9. Do university training programs effectively prepare candidates in instructional leadership?
10. Should more be done to grow administrators' capacities as instructional leaders? If yes what should be done?

Appendix E

Journal Response Prompts

Presession 1 Prompt

1. In five sentences or less, please articulate at least one goal you have for your professional growth as a result of your participation in our sessions.

Sessions 1-6 Prompts

1. In five sentences or less, please articulate your primary takeaways from today's session.
2. In five sentences or less, please articulate how you might put your learning into practice.
3. Please provide your feedback regarding ways today's session could be improved.

Appendix F

Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale

PART I: Please provide the following information if instructed to do so by the p

District Name: _____

Your School's Name: _____

Number of school years you have been an assistant principal at this school:

- ◯ 1
- ◯ 2-4
- ◯ 5-9
- ◯ 10-15
- ◯ more than 15

Years, at the end of this school year, that you have been an assistant principal:

- ◯ 1
- ◯ 2-4
- ◯ 5-9
- ◯ 10-15
- ◯ more than 15

Gender

- ◯ Male
- ◯ Female
- ◯ Prefer not to say

PART II: This questionnaire is designed to provide a profile of your leadership.

To what extent do you . . . ?

	Almost Never 1	Seldom 2	Sometimes 3	Frequently 4	Almost Always 5
Develop a focused set of annual school-wide goals	○	○	○	○	○
Frame the school's goals in terms of staff responsibilities for meeting them	○	○	○	○	○
Use needs assessment or other formal and informal methods to secure staff input on goal development	○	○	○	○	○
Use data on student performance when developing the school's academic goals	○	○	○	○	○
Develop goals that are easily understood and used by teachers in the school	○	○	○	○	○
Communicate the school's mission effectively to members of the school community	○	○	○	○	○
Discuss the school's academic goals with teachers at faculty meetings	○	○	○	○	○
Refer to the school's academic goals when making curricular decisions with teachers	○	○	○	○	○
Ensure that the school's academic goals are reflected in highly visible displays in the school (e.g., posters or bulletin boards emphasizing academic progress)	○	○	○	○	○
Refer to the school's goals or mission in forums with students (e.g., in assemblies or discussions)	○	○	○	○	○
Ensure that the classroom priorities of teachers are consistent with the goals and direction of the school	○	○	○	○	○
Review student work products when evaluating classroom instruction	○	○	○	○	○
Conduct informal observations in classrooms on a regular basis (informal observations are unscheduled, last at least 5 minutes, and may or may not involve written feedback or a formal conference)	○	○	○	○	○

	Almost Never 1	Seldom 2	Sometimes 3	Frequently 4	Almost Always 5
Point out specific strengths in teacher's instructional practices in post-observation feedback (e.g., in conferences or written evaluations)	○	○	○	○	○
Point out specific weaknesses in teacher instructional practices in post-observation feedback (e.g., in conferences or written evaluations)	○	○	○	○	○
Make clear who is responsible for coordinating the curriculum across grade levels (e.g., the principal, vice principal, or teacher-leaders)	○	○	○	○	○
Draw upon the results of school-wide testing when making curricular decisions	○	○	○	○	○
Monitor the classroom curriculum to see that it covers the school's curricular objectives the school's curricular objectives	○	○	○	○	○
Participate actively in the review of curricular materials	○	○	○	○	○
Meet individually with teachers to discuss student progress	○	○	○	○	○
Discuss academic performance results with the faculty to identify curricular strengths and weaknesses	○	○	○	○	○
Use tests and other performance measure to assess progress toward school goals	○	○	○	○	○
Inform teachers of the school's performance results in written form (e.g., in a memo or newsletter)	○	○	○	○	○
Inform students of school's academic progress	○	○	○	○	○
Limit interruptions of instructional time by public address announcements	○	○	○	○	○
Ensure that students are not called to the office during instructional time	○	○	○	○	○

	Almost Never 1	Seldom 2	Sometimes 3	Frequently 4	Almost Always 5
Ensure that tardy and truant students suffer specific consequences for missing instructional time	○	○	○	○	○
Encourage teachers to use instructional time for teaching and practicing new skills and concepts	○	○	○	○	○
Limit the intrusion of extra- and co-curricular activities on instructional time	○	○	○	○	○
Take time to talk informally with students and teachers during recess and breaks	○	○	○	○	○
Visit classrooms to discuss school issues with teachers and students	○	○	○	○	○
Attend/participate in extra- and co-curricular activities	○	○	○	○	○
Cover classes for teachers until a late or substitute teacher arrives	○	○	○	○	○
Tutor students or provide direct instruction to classes	○	○	○	○	○
Reinforce superior performance by teachers in staff meetings, newsletters, and/or memos	○	○	○	○	○
Compliment teachers privately for their efforts or performance	○	○	○	○	○
Acknowledge teachers' exceptional performance by writing memos for their personnel files	○	○	○	○	○
Reward special efforts by teachers with opportunities for professional recognition	○	○	○	○	○
Create professional growth opportunities for teachers as a reward for special contributions to the school	○	○	○	○	○
Ensure that inservice activities attended by staff are consistent with the school's goals	○	○	○	○	○
Actively support the use in the classroom of skills acquired during inservice training	○	○	○	○	○

	Almost Never 1	Seldom 2	Sometimes 3	Frequently 4	Almost Always 5
Obtain the participation of the whole staff in important inservice activities	○	○	○	○	○
Lead or attend teacher inservice activities concerned with instruction	○	○	○	○	○
Set aside time at faculty meetings for teachers to share ideas or information from inservice activities	○	○	○	○	○
Recognize students who do superior work with formal rewards such as an honor roll or mention in the principal's newsletter	○	○	○	○	○
Use assemblies to honor students for academic accomplishments or for behavior or citizenship	○	○	○	○	○
Recognize superior student achievement or improvement by seeing in the office the students with their work	○	○	○	○	○
Contact parents to communicate improved or exemplary student performance or contributions	○	○	○	○	○
Support teachers actively in their recognition and/or reward of student contributions to and accomplishments in class	○	○	○	○	○

Appendix G

Hattie Questionnaire

How confident are you in your ability...	1-Not Confident	2-Not Very Confident	3-Neutral	4-Somewhat Confident	5-Very Confident
to identify the elements of strong teacher culture in your school	○	○	○	○	○
to facilitate collective action among our teachers that benefit students instructional outcomes (ie: PLC, shared decision making)	○	○	○	○	○
To identity evidence of positive teacher student relationships during classroom observations	○	○	○	○	○
To support a teachers growth in building more effective relationships with students in their class	○	○	○	○	○
To identify effective uses of formative and summative assessment during classroom observations	○	○	○	○	○
To promote reflective teaching and learning practices in your school	○	○	○	○	○
To identify effective questioning and discussion strategies in classrooms	○	○	○	○	○
To assist teachers in developing more effective questioning strategies and cultivating student discussion about content in their classrooms	○	○	○	○	○
To identify the effectiveness and clarity of classroom instruction and expectations	○	○	○	○	○
To guide teachers develop and implement lessons that have a clear focus on appropriate learning targets	○	○	○	○	○
To have a conversation with any given teacher that results in the improvement in the overall quality of teaching in their classroom	○	○	○	○	○
To have a difficult conversation with any given teacher about the quality of their classroom instruction	○	○	○	○	○

Appendix H

Balancing Measure of Noninstructional Duties

Default Question Block

In your current role as an administrator, to what extent do you effectively...

	1 - Never	2 - Rarely	3 - Sometimes	4 - Often	5 - Always
balance your time and responsibilities?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
cultivate school spirit among the student body and staff?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
facilitate partnerships between your school and community?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
stick with the daily schedules you set for yourself?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
reinforce your school and district policies and procedures?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
manage student discipline?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
promote positive student and staff conduct?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
respond to emails and phone calls in a timely manner?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
manage job-related stress?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
balance competing job-related responsibilities?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
have a voice at the district level?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
communicate with the other members of your administrative team?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Please rank the following items in the order that they take priority in your weekly schedule, with 1 being the highest priority:

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Student Discipline	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Teacher Observations and Feedback	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Supervision	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Communication with Parents	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Event Planning	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Student Transportation	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Build Relationships with Internal Stakeholders	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Communicate with other Administrators	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Respond to Teacher Needs	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Participate in Meetings	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Appendix I

Final Reflection Prompt

1. While completing this series of professional development, you have had the opportunity to also complete formal observations of teachers and provide them with feedback. With those experiences in mind, write a reflection (1 page or less) in which you also address some of the following topics:
   a. What was most or least useful from the professional development sessions?
   b. What changes have you seen in your professional practice as a result of the professional development sessions?
   c. Has your approach to observations and feedback changed as a result of the professional development sessions? If so, how?