

Perceptions of Assistant Principals as Equity-Focused Instructional Leaders

Carmen Renee Waterford

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Jodie L. Brinkmann, Chair

Carol S. Cash

Katina W. Otey

Ted. S. Price

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Abstract

Educational equity is a strategy through which schools prioritize equitable access to learning experiences most appropriate for each student's needs. It is an attempt to reduce inequitable student outcomes by closing gaps in students' opportunities to access the teachers, learning, and resources they need. Instructional leaders are vital to how educational equity manifests in the school setting, and assistant principals serve in this capacity among many. The purpose of this study was to identify assistant principals' preparation, opportunity, and self-reported professional learning needs to serve as equity-focused instructional leaders. The researcher sought participation from a sample of assistant principals from four school divisions in Virginia. For this quantitative study, participants completed a researcher-developed survey about equity-focused instructional leadership practices adapted from an educational equity framework developed by the Virginia Department of Education and the nationally recognized BELE framework. The researcher analyzed survey responses and used descriptive statistics to report findings that answered three research questions about assistant principals' preparation, opportunity, and self-reported professional learning needs to serve as equity-focused instructional leaders. The data revealed that assistant principals are prepared and often engage in multiple equity-focused instructional leadership practices. Assistant principals would benefit from increased opportunities and additional professional learning in some areas of equity-focused instructional leadership. The researcher identified implications for the practice of assistant principals and made recommendations for future research that might provide insight for principals, division leaders, and state personnel into how to utilize and support assistant principals in this capacity.

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General Audience Abstract

Pursuing equity in the educational setting aims to reduce inequitable student outcomes by closing gaps in students' opportunities to access teachers, learning, and resources that address their specific needs. Assistant principals serve as instructional leaders and are vital to establishing and maintaining equity in the school setting. The purpose of this study was to identify assistant principals' preparation, opportunity, and self-reported professional learning needs to serve as equity-focused instructional leaders. The researcher sought insight into assistant principals' beliefs about their experiences as equity-focused instructional leaders, specifically in the areas of the equity-focused instructional leadership strategies outlined in a framework developed by the Virginia Department of Education and the nationally recognized BELE framework. The researcher sought to gain insight for principals, division leaders, and state personnel to support their efforts to utilize and support assistant principals in this capacity. The researcher conducted a quantitative study using a survey research design. The researcher conducted the study in Virginia and collected data from a sample of 65 assistant principals in four school divisions. The researcher analyzed responses to the survey and used descriptive statistics to report findings that answered three research questions about assistant principals' preparation, opportunity, and self-reported professional learning needs to serve as equity-focused instructional leaders. Findings indicate that assistant principals are both prepared and have opportunities to serve as equity-focused leaders. However, they would benefit from increased opportunities and professional learning to improve their practice.

Dedication

I dedicate this work to my mom, Karen, and my dad, Carl. Who I am and what I have accomplished on this journey would have been impossible without you. This work is as much yours as it is mine. Thank you.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Leaders who are cognizant of their students' needs, the skills of their staff, and are committed to cultivating an environment where the two are sufficiently aligned lead successful schools (Bridges, 1967; Edmonds, 1979; Grant, 2018; Hallinger & Wang, 2015; Neumerski, 2012). Equity-focused instructional leaders recognize that disparities in student outcomes result from inequitable educational opportunities (Carter & Welner, 2013; Grant, 2018; United States Department of Education [DOE], n.d.a). The practice of principals and assistant principals is critical in developing and maintaining a learning environment that equips teachers to consider and meet the needs of all students (Goldring, Rubin, & Herrmann, 2021; Murphy, 2021; Somoza-Norton & Neumann, 2021). Depending on their preparation and opportunity, assistant principals can influence how successfully the school creates and maintains equitable educational opportunities for all students (Fleming, 2019; Grant, 2018; Kinard, Pickett, & Shchetynska, 2019; Rubel, 2017; Virginia Department of Education [VDOE], 2020; Zardoya, 2017). This study investigated assistant principals' perceptions of their preparation, opportunity, and self-reported professional learning needs to serve as equity-focused instructional leaders.

Background of the Study

The first American public school, led by one schoolmaster serving only secondary male students, opened in 1635 (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2017). Since then, the American public education system has evolved regarding whom it serves, how it serves, and for what purpose it serves (Center on Education Policy [CEP], 2020). Public school leaders are now most commonly known as principals and assistant principals; they are managers, supervisors,

and instructional leaders (Austin, 1972; Austin & Brown, 1970; Glanz, 1994b; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Holland, 1968).

The civil rights movement triggered revelations of inequities in student achievement across ethnic groups beginning in the 1950s. As a result, the judicial and legislative branches of the federal government reformed education through decisions made in court and Congress, most notably with *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. Subsequent education reform in 2001 and 2015 triggered changes in systems and processes, allowing educators to focus on equitable student outcomes (Every Student Succeeds Act [ESSA], 2015; No Child Left Behind Act [NCLB] of 2001, 2002).

A shift in language about inequities in student achievement from the achievement gap to the opportunity gap is the foundation of equity-focused efforts to reform education and improve student outcomes (Carter & Welner, 2013; Grant, 2018; DOE, n.d.a). Moreover, equity-focused instructional leaders serving as principals and assistant principals are the bridge between equitable instructional practices and equitable student outcomes. Educational equity is an approach to educating students in a manner that meets the specific needs of each student (Fleming, 2019; Grant, 2018; Kinard et al., 2019; Rubel, 2017; VDOE, 2020; Zardoya, 2017).

Education Legislation

Since the first public school opened in 1635, the federal government has established and amended laws relevant to education. Beginning with interpretations of the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution written in 1868 to subsequent legislation through the 21st Century, the American government made legal decisions intended to advance the American education system(s) (U.S. Const. amend. XIV). Notably, the Civil Rights

Act of 1964 supported school districts' efforts to train instructional staff to deal with the effects of desegregation. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 addressed educational inequality and expanded funding to U.S. schools (Civil Rights Act of 1964, 1964; Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 1965).

In the early 2000s, the federal government developed education-related policies with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB, 2002). No Child Left Behind amplified the federal government's attention to its educational policies while increasing states' responsibilities for student outcomes (Heise, 2017; Klein, 2015). No Child Left Behind was the federal government's attempt to monitor states more closely, requiring them to hold schools and the larger systems accountable for student performance (Klein, 2015). More specifically, the law addressed apparent gaps in achievement that were most notable by race, socioeconomic status, and disability (Klein, 2015).

Emphasis on accountability under NCLB continued with the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA). Like NCLB, the purpose of ESSA is to improve student outcomes; however, ESSA, unlike NCLB, prioritizes the approach over the results. ESSA emphasizes equitable access to high-quality pre-school, developing, and maintaining schools with high academic standards, and sustained protections for high-needs and disadvantaged students (ESSA, 2015; Heise, 2017). According to the law, ESSA permits states to develop and monitor their performance measures, relieving them of some of the federal pressure once present under the requirements of NCLB (ESSA, 2015). ESSA also allows states to prioritize equitable access to a quality educational experience that results in the growth of all students (ESSA, 2015; Heise, 2017). The evolution of the public education system coincides with the evolution of education-related laws that address whom the system serves, how it functions, and why it exists.

Commonalities found in education-related laws include an interest in giving students access to quality teachers and classroom instruction and an interest in student achievement (ESEA, 1965; NCLB, 2002; ESSA, 2015). Under ESSA (2015), quality teaching requires that teachers are licensed, meet specific performance standards, and receive performance evaluations according to such standards. To do this, someone must supervise and support teachers. To provide better teacher support and supervision, and because principals were otherwise occupied with increasingly large schools, principals began to assign instructional leadership tasks to assistant principals as early as the 1940s (Glanz, 1994b).

Assistant Principals as Instructional Leaders

As schools grew in capacity, education laws and policies focused on accountability also increased. Schools expanded how they served all students (Glanz, 1994b). The growth and advancement of schools through the 1940s and 1950s required principals to secure additional leaders (Glanz, 1994b). These leaders supported the principal's efforts to manage school operations and personnel (Glanz, 1994b).

Building on Glanz's early research on the role of assistant principals, researchers from the Wallace Foundation discovered that the increase in assistant principals continued through the 90s and early 2000s, citing an increase of 83% in its research on the role and impact of assistant principals (Goldring et al., 2021). Speaking to their impact, Goldring, Rubin, and Herrmann (2021) found that effective assistant principals could help make student outcomes more equitable. In other recent research exploring the development of leaders and their impact on teacher outcomes, researchers suggest that school leadership today is even more involved, explicitly calling it complex, challenging, and multifaceted (VanGronigen, Cunningham, Young, & Tucker, 2021). Researchers suggest, "Building-level leaders, such as principals and assistant

principals, serve as instructional leaders, counselors, talent managers, social justice champions, budget directors, strategic planners, data investigators, recruiters, advocates, and marketing and communication experts"(VanGronigen et al., 2021, p. 27). The implication is that the assistant principal has a meaningful impact. The assistant principal is heavily involved in the school and serves in a capacity likely to significantly impact many aspects of the school, including student outcomes (Goldring et al., 2021; VanGronigen et al., 2021).

The Achievement Gap and Accountability

The disparity in academic performance between groups of students is known as the achievement gap (Ansell, 2011). In the researcher's explanation of the achievement gap, Ansell (2011) explains that disparities most commonly exist in students' grades, standardized test scores, course enrollment, and high school and college graduation rates. Broadly, the researcher explains where such disparities commonly exist; non-Hispanic white students have historically outperformed their Hispanic and African-American counterparts (Ansell, 2011). Further investigations into the achievement gap identify additional gaps between students according to socioeconomic status and disability (Ansell, 2011; Grant, 2018).

The Nation's Report Card for 2019 summarizes national, state, and district data on math, reading, and science performance (National Assessment of Educational Progress [NAEP], 2020). A search for trends amongst the data indicates the persistence of achievement gaps across ethnic groups, disabled students and their non-disabled peers, and students who qualify for the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and their ineligible peers. Similarly, Carnoy and García (2017) reported on trends in student performance. The report offers insight into the achievement gap, reporting that gaps across some ethnic groups have decreased since the 1990s while others persist. The report notes that most gaps in student achievement exist according to aspects

students cannot immediately control, such as race/ethnicity, disability, socioeconomic status, and their English language (EL) learning status (Carnoy & García, 2017). The latter two attributes alone impact students early in their academic careers, and they often require significant time to catch up to their peers (Carnoy & García, 2017).

The prevalence of achievement gaps in schools is a topic that has been widely studied (Ansell, 2011; Carnoy & García, 2017; Grant, 2018). Research into the achievement gap includes investigating which students are underperforming compared to peers who represent different subgroups (Ansell, 2011; Carnoy & García, 2017; Grant, 2018; NAEP, 2021.). Other popular topics relate to reasons achievement gaps exist, such as the culture of a school, the efficacy of classroom teachers, and school leadership (Carter & Welner, 2013; Grant, 2018; Hallinger & Wang, 2015; Neumerski, 2012; DOE, n.d.a). Other recent research focuses on solutions to the achievement gap. It attempts to re-conceptualize the prevalence of the gap, taking a solutions-based approach to its existence rather than an approach that only highlights inequities in student outcomes (Carter & Welner, 2013; Grant, 2018; DOE, n.d.a). Examining how the achievement gap persists is essential to determining appropriate remedies.

Educational Equity

Educational equity is a strategy through which schools approach the effort to close the achievement gap (Hofmann, 2021; National Equity Project [NEP], n.d.a; VDOE, 2020; Waterford.org, 2020). In a publication on equality, equity, and reform in education, Grant (2018) discusses the persistence of achievement gaps, attributing them to policymakers' misguided focus on equality since *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) through the No Child Left Behind Act (2002), missing opportunities to focus on equity in education. Equality in education provides students equal resources, opportunities, and experiences regardless of their individual needs

(Waterford.org, 2020). Equity in education aims to meet the needs of individual students so that all might overcome their specific challenges and perform at their highest potential

(Waterford.org, 2020).

The National Equity Project (NEP) was an early contributor to the conversation of equity in schools and defined equity in education: “Educational equity means that each child receives what they need to develop to their full academic social potential” (NEP, n.d.a, para. 1). In its 2020 *Road Map to Equity*, the Commonwealth of Virginia Department of Education’s (VDOE) Office of Equity and Community Engagement adopted its definition of education equity from the NEP: “Education Equity is achieved when we eliminate the predictability of student outcomes based on race, gender, zip code, ability, socioeconomic status or languages spoken at home” (2020, p. 8). In its framework for prioritizing equity in schools, the Building Equitable Learning Environment (BELE) Network envisions “resilient school systems that ensure academic, social, and emotional growth and well-being of all young people ensuring that social-cultural markers no longer negatively predict educational experiences and outcomes” (BELE Network, n.d., p. 6). Consistent in the definitions of educational equity is students’ access to opportunities they need as individual learners that result in outcomes dictated strictly by what students do with what they are provided in schools, not by who they are or what they lack before they enter the classroom.

Equity in education is the lens through which educators view and approach the achievement gap (DOE, n.d.a; Grant, 2018; Kinard et al., 2019; NEP, n.d.a; VDOE, 2020). As key influencers in school buildings, it is appropriate to determine what assistant principals believe about their ability to lead equitable learning environments and influence classroom instruction (Goldring et al., 2021; Held & Wall, 2021). Assistant principals sit between the principal and the principal’s vision of how a framework functions in the school setting, and the

teachers who will act upon the accompanying mission, imparting instruction to students (Goldring et al., 2021; Held & Wall, 2021; Murphy, 2021). Assistant principals need to see the principal's vision for equitable student outcomes and possess the skills and abilities to transform the vision of educational equity into necessary actions and desired results (Goldring et al., 2021; Kinard et al., 2019; Held & Wall, 2021; Murphy, 2021).

Statement of the Problem

Due to a worldwide pandemic beginning in March 2020 and an increase in social justice movements since the 1950s, inequities in education are at the forefront of conversations about public education (Simon, 2021). The achievement gap highlighting inequities in student performance across various student groups was the catalyst for the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB, 2002). The achievement gap is now known as the opportunity gap—inequitable access to all that a student needs from the learning environment—and educational equity is how both gaps are narrowed or potentially closed (DOE, n.d.a; Grant, 2018; Kinard et al., 2019; NEP n.d.a; VDOE, 2020). School leaders can close the achievement gap and minimize opportunity gaps by providing equitable access to a high-quality, relevant education for students based on their specific circumstances and needs (DOE, n.d.a; Grant, 2018; Kinard et al., 2019; NEP n.d.a; VDOE, 2020).

Among the factors contributing to differences in student outcomes, are the appropriateness and relevance of the curriculum, teachers' instructional practice, and students' access to appropriate resources within the learning environment (Goldring et al., 2021; Grant, 2018; Kinard et al., 2019). Assistant principals serve as instructional leaders that influence instruction-focused decisions and practices. As instructional leaders, they are involved—at varying degrees—in selecting curriculum, acquiring, supervising, and leading instructional

personnel; and acquiring and distributing instructional resources (Bridges, 1967; Glanz, 1994b; Gurley, Anast-May, & Lee, 2015; Hallinger & Wang, 2015). Assistant principals sit within the hierarchy of school personnel; they can see the principal's vision for equity and engage in leadership behaviors that directly influence instruction-focused school decisions (Murphy, 2021). Research on how assistant principals serve as instructional leaders in these capacities from an equity-focused lens is limited. Their understanding of the role in this regard and their perceived readiness and opportunity to serve in these capacities are relevant factors for understanding the persistence of achievement gaps, opportunity gaps, and, ultimately, how to improve student outcomes.

Significance of the Study

The researcher sought insight into assistant principals' perceptions of their preparation and opportunity to make equity-focused instructional leadership decisions and influence teachers' instructional practices. Knowing to what capacity assistant principals believe they can influence schools in these ways has implications for what one believes about the efficacy of assistant principals serving as equity-focused instructional leaders. In *Navigating EdEquityVA: Virginia's Road Map to Equity*, equity is the center of educators' work and the most influential factor in student outcomes (VDOE, 2020). In early 2020, The EdEquityVA framework served as the guide to achieving educational equity in Virginia schools and outlined steps for operationalizing equity strategies that align with the state's equity priorities. The VDOE's (2020) EdEquityVA framework offers ten equity-focused strategies to close the opportunity gap and eight equity-focused strategies intended to influence attitudes and behaviors that impact the learning environment and outcomes in the school setting. This study is relevant in Virginia, informing on assistant principals' equity-focused leadership experiences based on the

commonwealth's EdEquityVA framework. It is also relevant nationwide so long as advancing racial equity, supporting underserved communities, and improving student outcomes remain national priorities.

It is worth noting that the 2020 election resulted in a change in Virginia leadership and, thus, a shift in focus for the VDOE. The previous administration, under Gov. Ralph Northam, outlined plans to "dismantle any and all forms of inequity in Virginia's public education system" and empowered the state's Secretary of Education to do so (Masters, 2022, para. 3). However, Gov. Northam's successor, Gov. Glenn Youngkin, immediately prioritized "ending the use of inherently divisive concepts" through his first executive order which, in his view and the view of the state's Superintendent of Instruction, included the use of the Road Map to Equity and all resources provided on the VDOE's EdEquityVA website (Executive Order No. 1, 2022, Directive section).

Despite a shift in the focus of state leadership, the U.S. Department of Education outlined plans of its own related to the pursuit of equity in education in America in response to newly-elected President Biden's Executive Order on Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government (Executive Order No. 13985, 2021). Subsequently, U.S. Secretary of Education, Miguel Cardona, outlined five actionable items in the 22 Agency Equity Plan related to the president's executive order. Specifically, Sec. Cardona presented strategies to establish equity in college access and completion, the impact of American Rescue Plan funding for K-12 students, civil rights data collection, contracting and procurement, and grant process strategies (DOE, 2022). Sec. Cardona also included strategies for addressing opportunity and achievement gaps in an address at the DOE in 2022. Strategies include:

- Increasing funding for Title I schools and for IDEA [...]
- Providing free, universal pre-K and affordable high-quality child care
- Investing in, recruiting, and supporting the professional development of a diverse educator workforce, including special education teachers, paraprofessionals, and bilingual educators so education jobs are ones that people from all backgrounds want to pursue
- Challenging states and districts to fix broken systems that may perpetuate inequities in our schools. (DOE, 2022b, para. 4)

While Virginia's 74th governor struck down efforts to prioritize equity in education, presently, national perspectives on education recognize and aim to address inequities in American schools. For this study, the researcher referenced the VDOE's most recent plans to pursue equity in education in conjunction with national plans and strategies for addressing inequities in the American education system.

This study aimed to fill a gap in the literature about assistant principals serving as equity-focused instructional leaders. The impact of instructional leaders is well-documented; however, the self-perceived capability and opportunity of assistant principals to do so from equity-focused perspectives are not (Bridges, 1967; Gurley et al., 2015; Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Hallinger & Wang, 2015). More information about assistant principals' understanding of what it means to serve in such a capacity and their perceived ability and opportunity to do so will inform principals and district leaders on providing additional learning and opportunities to lead. This study also aimed to add to the general discussion of equity in education. Understanding if and how school leaders in one state operate as equity-focused instructional leaders will provide insight to state and national leaders and allow them to make

any necessary adjustments to their proposed strategies for addressing inequities in the American education system.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify assistant principals' preparation, opportunity, and self-reported professional learning needs to serve as equity-focused instructional leaders. As accountability measures persist in schools, progress toward improved, equitable student outcomes remains the focus for school leaders (DOE, n.d.a; Grant, 2018; Kinard et al., 2019; NEP, n.d.a; VDOE, 2020). Research suggests equity-focused instructional practices are essential for student achievement (Hofmann, 2021; NEP, n.d.a; VDOE, 2020; Waterford.org, 2020). Assistant principals who serve as instructional leaders are a factor in the implementation and efficacy of equity-focused instructional practices (Fleming, 2019; Grant, 2018; Kinard et al., 2019; Rubel, 2017; VDOE, 2020; Zardoya, 2017). The results of this study aim to inform principals and district leaders on how to prepare or utilize assistant principals as equity-focused instructional leaders. Results also provide insight into one state's equity-focused instructional leadership practices related to national educational equity priorities.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to identify assistant principals' preparation, opportunity, and self-reported professional learning needs to serve as equity-focused instructional leaders. Data from survey responses were collected and analyzed to answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent do assistant principals perceive they are prepared to serve as equity-focused instructional leaders?

2. To what extent do assistant principals currently practice or supervise equity-focused instructional leadership behaviors?
3. What are assistant principals' self-reported professional learning needs to support or advance their equity-focused instructional leadership in their current or future roles?

Overview of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify assistant principals' preparation, opportunity, and self-reported professional learning needs to serve as equity-focused instructional leaders. This study sought to understand assistant principals' perceptions of their ability, opportunity, and needs to serve as equity-focused instructional leaders according to state and national educational equity frameworks. Using quantitative research methodologies, the researcher developed and shared a survey with a sample of assistant principals from four school divisions in Virginia. The researcher collected survey responses and used descriptive statistics to describe and summarize themes that answered the three research questions.

Equity in schools is how educators can most effectively close the opportunity gap (DOE, n.d.a; Grant, 2018; Kinard et al., 2019; NEP, n.d.a; VDOE, 2020). This study intended to discover if assistant principals feel prepared and utilized as equity-focused instructional leaders in schools. Findings from this study aim to provide insight for principals, division leaders, and the state department of education leaders who aspire to establish and maintain equitable learning environments on how to better prepare, engage, and support assistant principals in their role as equity-focused instructional leaders.

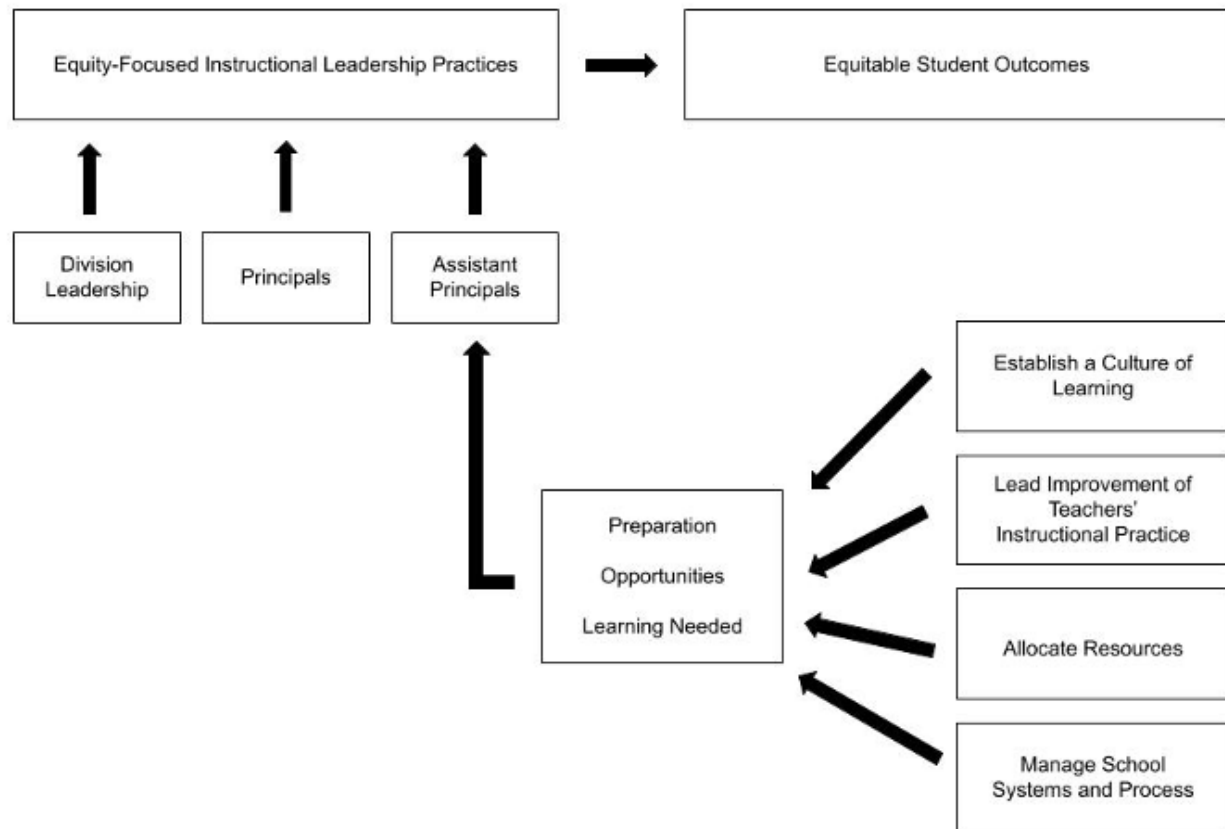
Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study was the theory that equity-focused instructional leadership practices result in equitable student outcomes (NEP, n.d.b; Somoza-Norton & Neumann, 2021). Assistant principals who take an active role in decisions that directly impact the quality of students' educational experiences, including their learning in the classroom and the resources available to them, positively influence student outcomes (Glanz, 2004; Goldring et al., 2021). All students benefit from having assistant principals who engage in equity-focused instructional leadership practices that influence teachers to adapt their instructional practice in learning environments that otherwise their needs (Somoza-Norton & Neumann, 2021). If assistant principals lack knowledge about equity-focused instructional practices and are either ill-prepared to lead in this capacity or are not given the opportunity, then schools neglect to utilize a powerful strategy for improving student outcomes.

Assistant principals' professional knowledge and practice ultimately affect student outcomes. Assistant principals must be knowledgeable and prepared to lead in this capacity; additionally, they need opportunity (Glanz, 2004; Goldring et al., 2021). Adequate preparation and sufficient opportunity to be involved in instruction-focused leadership decisions and practices are appropriate and necessary to ensure equitable instructional practices in classrooms (Somoza-Norton & Neumann, 2021). Assistant principals who are prepared and presented with opportunities to support the learning culture, lead the improvement of instruction, allocate resources appropriately, and effectively manage school processes contribute to establishing an equitable educational environment (Goldring et al., 2021; Somoza-Norton & Neumann, 2021). Figure 1 illustrates the concept of the influence of assistant principals' equity-focused instructional leadership on equitable student outcomes.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework



Equity in instruction and throughout the learning environment minimizes opportunity gaps, narrowing the achievement gap and pushing all students forward (DOE, n.d.a; Grant, 2018; Kinard et al., 2019; NEP, n.d.a; VDOE, 2020). Students' success is no longer a result of their circumstances or identity but rather a result of their access to a quality, individualized educational experience (DOE, n.d.a; Grant, 2018; Kinard et al., 2019; NEP, n.d.a; VDOE, 2020).

Definition of Terms

This section includes terms that appear throughout this paper. Definitions provide context for terms within this study.

Accountability. Virginia's accountability system supports teaching and learning by setting rigorous academic standards – known as the Standards of Learning (SOL) – and through annual statewide assessments of student achievement. Results from these tests – which most students take online – are used by the commonwealth to identify schools in need of assistance and to inform parents and the public about the progress of schools through the awarding of annual accreditation ratings (VDOE, n.d.a, Glossary of Education Terms section).

Achievement gap. "The difference between the performance of subgroups of students, especially those defined by gender, race/ethnicity, disability, and socioeconomic status" (VDOE, n.d.a, Glossary of Education Terms section).

Culturally responsive practices. The behavioral expressions of knowledge, beliefs, and values that recognize the importance of racial and cultural diversity in learning. An approach that emphasizes using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them (VDOE, n.d.a, Glossary of Education Terms section).

Economically disadvantaged. A student is economically disadvantaged if the student is eligible for the Free/Reduced Meals Program, receives Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), or is eligible for Medicaid. If the student is identified as experiencing homelessness or becomes identified as migrant, at any point during the school year, the student is automatically identified as economically disadvantaged (VDOE, n.d.a, Glossary of Education Terms section).

Educational equity. "Eliminating the predictability of student outcomes based on race, gender, zip code, ability, socioeconomic status, or languages spoken at home" (VDOE, 2020, p. 10).

Instructional leader. "The instructional leader makes instructional quality the top priority of the school and attempts to bring that vision to realization (Jenkins, 2009, p. 35).

Opportunity gap. "Describes the complex issues that contribute to achievement gaps and recognizes the historical and societal implications of the way race and class influence the kind of education and access to support a student is likely to receive" (VDOE, 2020, Glossary of Education Terms).

Limitations

Multiple limitations influenced this study. Although academic and professional colleagues vetted the researcher-developed survey, this study was the first use of the survey; therefore, its validity and reliability were potentially limited. In addition, the researcher developed survey questions from leadership behaviors and strategies discussed in just two educational equity frameworks. In researching the topic, the researcher discovered that educational equity frameworks are similar in theme and practice. The researcher referenced just two frameworks to simplify the conversation about educational equity. Using other frameworks might have impacted survey questions and responses and, thus, the findings and implications of the study.

The research design might also be a limitation of the study. Collecting data from participants in Likert-type scale responses limits potential responses. This study might have benefited from using a survey that asked more open-ended questions allowing respondents to explain their perceptions of their preparation, experiences, and professional learning needs. In addition, each survey item was optional; therefore, every participant did not complete the survey. The result of these facts was twofold: responses with varied sample sizes and 12 incomplete surveys from 65 participants.

Additionally, research on educational equity and using equity as an instructional leadership framework is limited, particularly from the school leader's perspective. The concept of equity is not new, as indicated by previously discussed education legislation; however educational research on the application and effectiveness of equity as an educational framework is limited to date, as research on how assistant principals, specifically, affect equity in schools. The lack of prior research may have impacted perspectives of relevant topics and the researcher's approach to researching said topics.

Delimitations

The study took place in the Commonwealth of Virginia. The state consists of 132 school divisions; however, the researcher sought participants from four of the state's school divisions. Though each of the four school divisions varies in demographics, size, and structure, the results may not represent all divisions across the state and its multiple regions, nor may they represent school divisions nationwide. The researcher chose the school divisions based on their size to gain more study participants. The researcher also chose the four school divisions due to their responsiveness and timelines for accepting outside research requests.

Also potentially relevant is that the researcher has been an assistant principal in one of the school divisions selected for this research. The researcher's professional relationships and proximity to participants potentially impacted their participation and responses to the survey. Despite this, the researcher continued to pursue a research opportunity with the school division due to their apparent interest in topics related to equity and student achievement and their timelines for accepting outside research opportunities. For this reason and others, participation in the survey was voluntary and confidential to limit this influence, and all participants remained anonymous.

Additionally, and purposefully, the researcher's investigation was limited to assistant principals. Though principals are instructional leaders, the researcher did not seek perspectives from principals at any level in this study. Participation from both types of instructional leaders with similar influences on student achievement might yield different findings and implications.

Organization of the Study

The introductory chapter includes an overview of the study, including the problem statement, purpose and significance, relevant research questions, and theoretical framework. Chapter two includes a review of literature related to prior research on the role of assistant principals, instructional leadership, and educational equity in schools. Chapter three presents the methodology detailing the sample selection, research design, instrumentation, and data analysis techniques. The fourth chapter details the results and analysis of the data. Chapter five discusses relevant findings, implications, and suggestions for future research.

Chapter Two

Review of the Literature

Introduction

Literature on the assistant principal's role ranges from the origins of the position to its evolution resulting from the growth of schools and increased accountability measures (Nieuwenhuizen, 2011). Prevailing themes in studies consider educational leadership preparation programs' efficacy before an assistant principalship and assistant principals' development as instructional leaders while serving in the role (Gurley et al., 2015; Peters, Gurley, Fifolt, Collins, and McNeese, 2016). Job ambiguity and perceptions of ill-preparedness are common themes in the literature that complicate if and how assistant principals serve as instructional leaders (Shore & Walshaw, 2106; Sun & Shoho, 2017). Professional standards and licensure requirements exist by state; however, they are either specific to the principal's role or are generally applicable to educational leaders in various roles but not differentiated for the assistant principal (NPBEA, 2018).

A recurring theme in educational research is how school leaders influence learning environments, teacher performance, and student outcomes (Goldring et al., 2021; VanGronigen et al., 2021). Another theme in educational research is the interest in improving student outcomes (Ansell, 2011; Carnoy & García, 2017; Grant, 2018). Among these themes are the various strategies school leaders utilize to close the persistent achievement gap and meet the needs of individual students. Educational equity frameworks exist to guide school systems through closing gaps in students' opportunities and access to relevant learning experiences so that they all might reach their potential (Grant, 2018; Hofmann, 2021; NEP, n.d.a; VDOE, 2020; Waterford.org, 2020).

This literature review aims to present a synthesis of research on the preparation and role of assistant principals, assistant principals as instructional leaders, and how assistant principals influence equitable learning environments. This review contends that the preparation, development, and expectations of assistant principals as instructional leaders are as wide-ranging and varied as the principals, schools, and divisions they serve. It also suggests that assistant principals can and should be influential in schools. However, assistant principals' practice as equity-focused instructional leaders and how their equitable practices manifest in the school setting are under-researched topics.

Literature Search and Review Process

The search for scholarly research literature began with searches for dissertations about assistant principals. Initially, the focus was on how assistant principals prepare to become principals; the search process revealed that this topic was common and heavily discussed. However, such searches also revealed additional topics to consider about assistant principals as leaders, separate from principals. Continued research on assistant principals led to studies about the origins of the position and processes preceding placement in the role, such as academic and professional preparation, and experiences in the role, such as professional development and instructional leadership. Factors affecting the efficacy of assistant principals include the persistence of an ambiguous and varied job description, unclear or inaccurate expectations about the role and their perceptions of their ability to do the job. As recent research presented the role of assistant principals in schools within the context of increased accountability in education, assistant principals' role in instructional leadership surfaced as a topic to investigate further. The topic of instructional leadership led to studies about its influence on student achievement, the achievement gap, and the opportunity gap. Research studies investigating instructional leadership

discussed remedies to such gaps, including effective instructional leadership and educational equity.

Search terms used in the initial search process of Virginia Tech University Libraries databases and interlibrary loans were *educational leadership*, *assistant principals*, *principal preparation*, and *assistant principal leadership*. The search process was expanded with the terms *educational leadership preparation* and *assistant principal professional development* using additional databases, including Google Scholar, ERIC, EBSCO, OATD, and ProQuest. Search terms *achievement gap*, *opportunity gap*, *instructional leadership*, and *educational equity* were extensive topics; it was necessary to identify connections to assistant principals. Dissertations provided additional sources and helped expand the search to provide relevant background information provided in this literature review. Broader searches of *assistant principal* and *instructional leadership* required referencing older sources to discuss them more thoroughly. Searches of *educational equity* yielded results that included more recent research studies.

The abstract, purpose of the study, research questions, study methods, and findings provided insight into a study's relevance to the research topic. Once deemed relevant, organizing sources by theme helped determine their relevance to the literature review's content. Understanding the nature and scope of the investigation helped identify which studies to discuss in greater detail in this literature review.

Historical Background

To discuss if and how assistant principals are prepared and developed as equity-focused instructional leaders, one should consider the origins of the assistant principal's role and the inception of the concept and practice of equity-focused instructional leadership. The assistant

principalship is often considered an entry point into educational leadership (Mitchell, Armstrong, and Hands, 2017). It is a position near the top of a school's hierarchy of leaders and educators—subordinate to the principal and superior to teachers and other school staff (Glanz, 1994b).

Instructional leadership is discussed in theory and as a practice of any education leader; it is not a concept unique to an assistant principal's role (Enloe, 2016). Equity-focused instructional leadership is a concept that came about in response to increased accountability and efforts to meet the needs of all students (Carter & Welner, 2013; Fleming, 2019; Grant, 2018; Johnson, 2018; Kinard et al., 2019; Rubel, 2017; United States Department of Education (DOE), n.d.a; Zardoya, 2017). The practice of assistant principals and equity-focused instructional leadership are related but not synonymous; therefore, they are explained independently and dependently in this literature review.

Origins of the Role of the Assistant Principal

The assistant principal's title and original responsibilities came about in the 1940s in response to school principals' need to shift some supervisory tasks to another leader in the school building (Glanz, 1994b). Holland (1968) claimed that the title held by individuals supporting the principal only mattered as much as it affected their status in the school building and on the school's team (Holland, 1968). Glanz (1994b) explained that the title, assistant principal, grew in popularity between the 1940s and 1950s as scholars sought to qualify the relationship between a principal and a general supervisor. Both assertions emphasized the need to distinguish the principal's role from others within the school community.

In a publication on the origins and future of the assistant principalship, Glanz (1994b) discussed the transition from superintendent-managed schools to principal-led schools in the early part of the twentieth century. Glanz (1994b) argued that the increase in schools in the

1920s and 1930s and the subsequent shift in school leadership led to increased principal appointments. Along with the increase in principal appointments came a change in their professional responsibilities, becoming more managerial, much unlike principals a decade prior who spent significant time with—and sometimes as—classroom teachers (Glanz, 1994b). Glanz (1994b) argued that more principals with additional or new responsibilities led to a need for shared, or distributed, leadership in the form of supervisors and, later, assistant principals.

Glanz (1994b) claimed that appointing additional supervisors was the solution to growing and increasingly demanding school systems and further explained the different school leadership roles. According to Glanz (1994b), a special supervisor was a teacher selected by the principal to support inexperienced teachers improve their content mastery. Like most teachers during the 1920s, the special supervisor was often female; she was generally respected and accepted amongst her peers. Conversely, a general supervisor was a male teacher chosen to support the principal with logistics and operations and support classroom teachers, often in math and science. The general supervisor did administrative and evaluative tasks, making classroom teachers less receptive to him. Throughout the 1920s, the male general supervisor became the more prominent role of the two, likely due to workplace gender discrimination common at the time (Glanz 1994b).

Similarly, years prior, Holland (1968) presented the principal's assistants as individuals whose sole purpose was to support the principal in his responsibilities. Holland (1968) suggested that the principal "must divest himself of as much routine detail as he can, else he becomes so bogged down with the desk work that he cannot give attention to all the wide facets of the school" (p. 56). These individuals should be available to do the job, "be interested in school administration, [be] aware of the scope of the school, [be] sensitive to individual human needs,

and [be] resourceful in solving problems of human relations and both the adolescent and adult levels" (Holland, 1968, p. 57). Glanz (1994b) also explained the role of the assistant principal at inception:

They were subordinate to principals and were seen as advisers with little, if any, independent formal authority [...] Given the fact that the assistant principalship originated as an administrative function, it is not surprising that the primary responsibilities of APs have always centered on routine administrative tasks, custodial duties, and discipline. Assistant principals have not usually been charged with instructional responsibilities, in large measure due to the historical antecedents that led to the development of the position in schools. (Glanz, 1994b, p. 39)

The assistant principalship originates in reducing the burden on principals' micro and macro responsibilities (Holland, 1968). The need arose for schools to have a leader designated to assist the principal with administrative tasks; the job's responsibilities did not include instructional leadership tasks and teacher-leadership tasks like that of the general supervisor (Glanz, 1994b). While the title is inconsequential, according to Holland (1968), the assistant principal's role is not. The literature explains that the emergence of the assistant principal in schools was necessary for the principal and the school to operate and serve student and staff needs (Glanz, 1994b; Holland, 1968).

Evolution of the Role of the Assistant Principal

In early research, Austin and Brown (1970) conducted a three-part study surveying over 2,300 principals and assistant principals in seven geographical regions. The study's purpose was to discover more about the people who serve as assistant principals and the nature of their work

in the role (Austin & Brown, 1970). The researchers defined leadership in the context of the assistant principal:

The assistant principal is the person who really runs the school. It is the assistant principal... who is most frequently and readily available, to whom one can most freely turn for help in time of trouble, who is most willing to make decisions when decisions are needed. (Austin & Brown, 1970, p. 9)

Austin and Brown gained the most accurate perspective from the shadow study of participants. They concluded that, ultimately, assistant principals manage student behaviors and supervise people and operations more than they improve aspects of the school.

Subsequently, Austin (1972) conducted a follow-up study to gather data on assistant principals over two years through three studies like those conducted with Brown (Austin & Brown, 1970):

1. A normative study in which the researcher surveyed a twenty percent sampling of schools in all fifty states about the nature of their work as assistant principals.
2. A normative study of responses from 419 participants from a standard metropolitan statistical area within eight geographical regions seeking information about participants' demographics and career patterns.
3. A shadow study in which the researcher shadowed two assistant principals to document how they spent their time.

Based on participants' responses, Austin (1972) claimed that the role of the assistant principal was markedly different from other positions in the school due to the specialization of its administrative function and because of influences at the time, including the behaviors of students, teachers, and parents that threatened the position and authority of educators. The researcher found: "In most cases, it was clear that the assistant principal was everywhere, and

involved in a great variety of activities—many of them of a 'crisis' type" (Austin, 1972, p. 70). The researcher reported that the assistant principals in the study spent time on tasks no one else seemed prepared to do, were overloaded with those tasks, and were more responsible for their schools' general success than they believed.

Notably absent from Austin's mid-1960s three-part study is any reference to assistant principals serving in any instructional leadership capacity; instructional leadership did not surface as a relevant topic until 15 years later (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). Studies investigating the assistant principalship are not as common as those that investigate the principalship. The lack of reporting on assistant principals is neither new nor unique in education and its leadership preparation programs (Glanz, 1994a). When they occur, studies on assistant principals provide glimpses into the evolution of the position and clarity—or lack thereof—regarding the role's relevance. Timothy J. Dyer, executive director of the National Association of Secondary School Principals from 1990-1998, claimed,

very little was said about the AP's job in university training programs, and almost nothing was said about it in professional books or journals. The AP was simply regarded as someone employed—if the school's enrollment justified it—to take some of the burden off the principal. (Glanz, 1994a, p. 283)

Cohen and Schechter (2019) emphasized that "there is almost no formalized job description covering their roles and responsibilities" (p.100) in their reporting of factors that influence or deter teachers from seeking to become assistant principals. After forty years, the school leadership position remains universally undefined. Its responsibilities vary as much or as little as the principals they follow and the school teams they lead. "In contrast to a large number of studies relating to the principal's role and its contribution to school performance, research on

the assistant principal's role and its significance are insufficient" (Cohen & Schechter, 2019, p. 100). Cohen and Schechter (2019) referred to the assistant principal as "the forgotten leader" (p. 100). The assistant principalship is understudied and remains universally undefined in education.

The Emergence of Instructional Leadership

According to Hallinger and Wang (2015), instructional leadership began as a construct to thoroughly describe the practice, or behaviors, of principals in the 1950s. They contended that it re-emerged in the 1980s as researchers sought to investigate why some schools were more effective at student achievement than others. Initially, Bridges (1967) presented a conceptual framework through which to consider instructional leadership, focusing on four ways to view an instructional leader's behaviors. Hallinger and Wang (2015) further explained the evolution of instructional leadership regarding the nature and scope of those behaviors. Both sets of researchers offered additional insight by providing a detailed, historical look at instructional leadership practices and behaviors and outcomes associated with those behaviors. Hallinger and Wang (2015) used their findings and made a case for an instructional leadership assessment tool.

Bridges (1967) asserted that principals have many responsibilities, but a school's curricula and instruction are the most significant. At the same time, Bridges argued that there was no clear definition of instructional leadership but identified four behaviors of the principal as an instructional leader: evaluate, help, integrate, and design. An evaluator is concerned with how employees perform in the context of the organization's demands (Bridges, 1967). Evaluating includes determining if organization goals are being realized, determining compliance with organization policies, and determining teacher retention, promotion, transfer, or dismissal. According to Bridges (1967), principals, as evaluators, are most concerned with accountability.

Concerning the second behavior, Bridges (1967) claimed that principals who lead as helpers are teacher-focused. Their strategy is to observe teachers, communicate observations to teachers, and offer to support teachers accordingly. From this view, the instructional leader works to prevent the organization from negatively influencing teacher efficacy. In this case, Bridges (1967) suggested that the principal's instructional leadership should maintain teachers' success despite barriers present in the larger school structure.

Presenting another view, Bridges (1967) explained that principals should be able to integrate the needs, concerns, and performance of teachers with the organization's priorities and goals. According to this view of instructional leadership, communication and cooperation are key factors impacting the teacher-principal relationship. From this perspective, Bridges (1967) asserted that the principal and teacher work together to discuss the teacher's performance and collaborate on a path to growth and improvement. The principal ensures that the teacher's growth goals align with the organization's goals for growth or progress.

Bridges (1967) contended that principals serving as designers must construct the complete school environment. In this case, principals create school communities based on specific needs, including selecting personnel, facilities, resources, and the academic program(s) available to students. Schools are constructed or designed with a purpose. Specifically, the system is organized and balanced by the principal's decisions to ensure the appropriate pieces come together for the entire organization's benefit (Bridges, 1967).

Critical of the limits of the principal's ability to serve as an instructional leader according to the four previously mentioned views, Bridges (1967) offered an alternative or revised concept of a principal as instructional leadership: the principal as an experimenter. Where serving as evaluator, helper, integrator, or designer encompasses instructional leadership components, a

principal serving as the experimenter is more representative of the comprehensive behaviors and ideals an instructional leader should possess (Bridges, 1967). Bridges (1967) submitted, the experimenter view of instructional leadership calls upon the principal to establish an ‘experimental social system’ in which he and other members of the social system continually try different approaches to their problems and examine the consequences of their actions for the functioning of the system. (p. 145)

This forward-looking approach to instructional leadership presupposes that what leaders know about the educational system is limited and insufficient (Bridges, 1967). Bridges (1967) also claimed that the experimenter approach also meant that growth in the system—the acquisition and utilization of new strategies for success in teaching, learning, and achievement in these areas—is connected to the leader's deliberate pursuit of growth and advancement of the system.

Bridges (1967) further described the educational environment when the principal serves in an instructional leadership capacity as the experimenter:

Definitive answers to significant educational problems are not yet available. If solutions are to be found it will require a climate of experimentation—a climate in which difficulties are continually identified by surveying instructional practices, records (e.g., achievement and aptitude), and perceptions; a climate in which a decision is reached to resolve these difficulties; a climate in which interpersonal support is given to those who implement the decision; and a climate in which the consequences, both anticipated and unanticipated, of the decision are studied and analyzed. (p. 146)

The principal should not simply implement—or react—based on others’ behaviors and needs in the system, as is the case as an evaluator, helper, integrator, and designer (Bridges, 1967).

(Bridges, 1967). According to Bridges (1967), the climate requires that the principal is an active

participant and leader in instructional matters behaving as the experimenter and inventor in the system.

Like Bridges before them, Hallinger and Wang (2015) sought to understand the behaviors and practices of principals who found success in unlikely circumstances. The researchers later synthesized research on instructional leadership and gathered that the Effective Schools Movement of the 1980s revealed and promoted practices and behaviors principals exhibited to influence a school's success (Hallinger & Wang, 2015). Edmonds (1979) conducted early research on effective schools and concluded:

In the improving schools, the principal is more likely to be an instructional leader, more assertive in his/her institutional leadership role, more of a disciplinarian, and perhaps most of all, assumes responsibility for the evaluation of the achievement of basic objectives. (p. 18)

Edmonds's (1979) conclusion was rooted in studies investigating why some principals found success despite circumstances that might otherwise be challenging, such as student poverty. Edmonds's research and research that followed for several years emphasized the importance of the principal's ability to lead the school's effort to educate all students (Hallinger & Wang, 2015). Hallinger and Wang (2015) suggested further that instructional leadership began as a "practice-oriented, prescriptive conceptions of principal leadership" that evolved into a "theory-informed, research-based construct"(p. 10). In their research, Hallinger and Heck (1996a, 1996b, 1998) explored principals' specific contributions to school effectiveness. They concluded that instructional leadership predominated perspectives of school leadership research and school leadership outcomes in the 1990s.

Neumerski (2012) explained, "successful school leaders are not just managers, but are *instructional* leaders" and that "their work is highly focused on the core technology of schools, that is, teaching and learning"(pp. 317-318). The researcher argued that principals' initial association as instructional leaders did not provide insight into how principals led instruction. Neumerski pointed out that Hallinger and Murphy attempted to dive deeper into the principals as instructional leaders when they identified three dimensions of instructional leadership: defining the mission, managing curriculum and instruction (C & I), and promoting school climate (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Neumerski, 2012). Hallinger and Murphy (1985) further explained the functions of the dimensions: defining the mission includes framing and communicating goals; managing C & I includes knowing C & I, coordinating curriculum, as well as supervising, evaluating, and monitoring the progress of C & I; and promoting school climate includes setting standards and expectations, protecting time, and promoting improvement.

In the 1980s, Hallinger (1990) developed the Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (PIMRS) to study instructional leadership further. However, researchers found that it could also assess and evaluate principals' needs (Hallinger & Wang, 2015). In collaboration with school administrators in a local district, Hallinger and Wang (2015) analyzed prior studies conducted by other researchers on the assistant principal's role. From their analysis, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with school staff to determine in what capacity they believed the principal to serve as an instructional leader. The researchers then formulated a comprehensive, multi-dimensional list of principals' job responsibilities and behaviors as instructional leaders (Hallinger & Wang, 2015). They identified 50 principal behaviors that assessed the dimensions and functions of instructional leadership. Hallinger and Wang (2015) place responsibility and behavior categories on a rating scale; they include, but are not limited to,

involvement in framing and communicating goals, protecting time, and being visible. Using the PIMRS scale requires that survey data be collected by and about principals as instructional leaders. Principals are scored based on the established scale that rates essential functions of an instructional leader's job (Hallinger & Wang, 2015).

With the PIMRS as a guide, The Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium developed national standards for school leaders in 1996, referred to as ISLLC standards (Neumerski, 2012). Neumerski (2012) also informs that the ISLLC standards were revised in 2008 and emphasized school administration more holistically but did include instructional leaders' essential behaviors. Behaviors specific to instructional leadership under the ISLLC standards included:

- (a) developing and facilitating a school vision of learning,
- (b) advocating and nurturing a school culture conducive to student learning,
- (c) managing the organization for an effective learning environment,
- (d) collaborating with families and community members and responding to needs and mobilizing resources,
- (e) acting with integrity and fairness, and
- (f) understanding and influencing the larger sociopolitical context. (Neumerski, 2012, p. 319)

Revised again in 2015, the ISLLC Standards became the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) 2015 (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015). The 2015 standards equally emphasize ten categories of educational leadership behaviors, some of which include the instructional leadership practices from the 2008 standards and approach educational

leadership more holistically in terms of all stakeholders and all areas of a functioning school (NPBEA, 2015).

Hallinger and Wang (2015) presented instructional leadership as an educational concept born in the 1950s to qualify the practice of principals. It later became the focal point of investigations into effective schools and leaders that found success in unlikely situations (Edmonds, 1979). It is a concept that presupposes school leaders play a role in their school's academic programs, including, but not limited to, teaching and learning, and curriculum and instruction (Hallinger, 1990; Neumerski, 2012). The concept of educational leadership has been considered, standardized, and revised over time. Instructional leadership is one component of educational leadership in the most updated Professional Standards for Educational Leaders 2015 (NPBEA, 2015).

Assistant Principals as Instructional Leaders

Literature on the assistant principalship ranges from the origins of the position to how assistant principals spend their time in schools (Barnett, Shoho, and Oleszewski, 2012; Militello, Fusarelli, Mattingly, and Warren, 2015). Notably, a universally accepted definition, or role description, does not exist. The literature more readily discusses what assistant principals do but does not always define the position (Mitchell et al., 2017). Additionally, assistant principals and school leadership are not always synonymous: "Mention the term 'school leadership' and most people immediately think of principals" before they think about assistant principals (Barnett et al., 2012, p. 92). These are necessary distinctions; although they are school leaders, discussions of assistant principals do not always include discussions of instructional leadership.

Although instructional leadership is not the sole professional task of assistant principals, it is necessary to understand the role and the task independently and dependently (VanTuyle,

2018). Studies on assistant principals range from how educators are prepared for and placed into the role, their daily practices and efficacy as assistant principals, and how the role prepares them for a principalship (Kelly, 1987; Leaf & Odhiambo, 2017). Notably, studies on instructional leadership reference the principal's ability to influence teaching and learning; they do not often reference the assistant principal's role in the same capacity (Bridges, 1967; Hallinger & Wang, 2015). Common themes in studies about assistant principals as instructional leaders are rooted in inconsistencies in preparation, development, and authentic opportunities to be instructional leaders (Gurley et al., 2015; James, 2017; Kearney & Herrington, 2013; Peters et al., 2016; Young, Anderson, & Nash, 2017).

Preparation and Development as Instructional Leaders

It is appropriate to review the literature on assistant principals' preparation and development as instructional leaders (James, 2017; Peters et al., 2016; Young et al., 2017). One must also gain insight into how assistant principals perceive their preparation to lead instruction (Allen & Weaver, 2014). It is also relevant to include literature on the role schools and school districts play in preparing and developing assistant principals as instructional leaders (Barnett, Shoho, & Okilwa, 2017; Gurley et al., 2015; Master, Steiner, Doss, and Acheson-Field, 2020).

Educational Leadership Programs

The coursework requirement is a variable in acquiring a Level I endorsement in administration and supervision PreK-12. In addition to understanding the logistics of licensure and certification requirements for securing an assistant principalship, educational leadership programs "are the heart of educational leaders' pre-professional growth and professional advancement" (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2018, p. 6). An

educational leadership program's quality and its courses correlate to alignment with the National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) standards (NPBEA, 2018).

The NELP standards for building-level leadership preparation address the most critical knowledge and skill areas for beginning building-level educational leaders... [and] specify what novice leaders and preparation program graduates should know and be able to do after completing a high-quality educational leadership preparation program.

(NPBEA, 2018, p. 3)

Though the standards are not specific to assistant principals, as there is no known leadership preparation program specific to assistant principals, advanced master, specialist, and doctoral programs do prepare assistant principals, among other leaders, for educational leadership. The fourth standard, Learning and Instruction, addresses instruction broadly. The standard states,

candidates who successfully complete a building-level educational leadership preparation program understand and demonstrate the capacity to promote the current and future success and well-being of each student and adult by applying the knowledge, skills, and commitments necessary to evaluate, develop, and implement coherent systems of curriculum, instruction, data systems, supports, and assessment. (NPBEA, 2018, p. 18)

Reporting on the NELP standards as the basis of educational leadership curricula, Young, Anderson, and Nash (2017) reviewed, analyzed, and mapped school leadership research to determine the use and efficacy of the standards in educational leadership practice in preparation programs. Through their investigation of current programs, the researchers discovered sufficient prior literature and research that indicates the standards offer complete and appropriate guidance for the skills and knowledge school leaders need. Young et al. asserted that the standards should transform beginning leaders into fully knowledgeable, skilled agents of best instructional

practice in schools. However, the researchers expressed concerns that using a curriculum based solely on the NELP standards falls short. Young et al. (2017) argued that the standards do not prepare leaders to shape their own unique educational leadership paths despite achieving some success early in their careers. The concern does not explicitly impact assistant principals' potential as instructional leaders but speaks more to assistant principals' professional experience (Young et al., 2017).

James (2017) conducted a qualitative study of educational leadership program directors to learn their views on how the program curricula and coursework in state-approved programs specifically address the assistant principal's role. The researcher surveyed nine program directors or their designees, who all reported that their programs address the role. However, there is no course or program requirement specific to the assistant principalship in their respective programs. One respondent reported that his/her program offers an assistant principal-specific course as an elective. Another respondent reported the need for a broader offering of leadership experiences beyond principalships. A different respondent reported that his/her program already offered students a range of experiences to prepare them for various leadership roles (James, 2017).

Respondents in James's study aligned with Glanz's (2004) assertion that an assistant principal's education should not be limited to learning on the job when he presented his strategies for being a successful assistant principal. However, respondents in James's (2017) study believed their programs to be a sufficient educational leadership program experience for aspiring assistant principals. However, respondents disagreed on the need for assistant principal-specific coursework and its appropriateness for their respective programs. The lack of consensus

on the need for assistant principal-specific coursework geared toward the assistant principalship was surprising. James (2017) suggested,

if program faculty know that their graduates are entering a specific leadership position, it is prudent to help prepare them for that role by specifically addressing it in the curriculum. This type of preparation is common to what is done in Schools of Education. (p. 6)

Concerning educational leadership program participants, Peters, Gurley, Fifolt, Collins, and McNeese (2016) conducted a qualitative study of the perceived preparedness of nine graduates of an educational leadership program serving as assistant principals at the time. The investigation manifested through inquiries about participants' roles as assistant principals, feeling unprepared, and if their educational leadership preparation program prepared them for specific job duties. The central question and its summary answers were as follows:

'Did your educational leadership program prepare you for the roles as an assistant principal?' In response to this question the answer is a resounding yes-but. Yes, APs valued their formal graduate school education and felt prepared by the coursework and expertise of their professors and adjuncts. In the focus group discussions of principal preparation, many participants said they were as prepared as they could be for their leadership role. (Peters et al., 2016, p. 194)

Emerging themes from participants' responses and subsequent discussion in the study conducted by Peters et al. (2016) fell into four categories: gaps in knowledge, feelings and emotions on the job, real-life applications, and mentoring. Respondents found it difficult to promptly acquire new administrative skills while not losing a grasp of previously learned and utilized classroom proficiency and best practices. The researchers, Peters et al. (2016), noted that

tasks requiring knowledge and action in technology implementation and integration for instructional purposes, the management of and responsibility for school programs, and matters involving school budget and finance were areas of growth for the respondents. Moreover, Peters et al. (2016) reported that the four educational leadership faculty who surveyed the respondents acknowledged learning much after their students secured their desired school leadership positions despite their best efforts.

The study provides insight into the experiences of school leaders who acknowledged their professional shortcomings and the need to learn on the go, as Glanz (2004) discouraged. Peters et al. (2016) also acknowledged the study's lack of generalizability due to the small sample. However, they used their findings to challenge educational leadership programs to prepare students to handle feeling unprepared. The researchers concluded:

It is imperative that university educational leadership programs[...] be in a perpetual cycle of self-assessment to insure program relevance and to insure that program graduates are as prepared as possible to assume school leadership roles, particularly as APs[.] First, leadership faculty and program planners would be well-advised to prepare candidates for the inevitability of learning gaps they will experience upon matriculation to formal leadership roles in schools[.] Second, leadership programming may be improved substantially by helping to prepare pre-service school leaders for the emotional challenges of the job[.] Finally, our study provides further evidence for the necessity of helping students make connections between the more theoretical or book learning they experience in their leadership classrooms to the practical application of this knowledge in the context of their roles in schools. (Peters et al., 2016, pp. 195-196)

According to newly hired school administrators, practical application is essential to discussing Kearney and Herrington's (2013) studies of the effectiveness of a then-new educational leadership program. Kearney and Herrington's studies responded to an article in which the author suggested that educational leadership programs are weak for many reasons. Levine (2005) suggested a significant weakness included providing insufficient, incomplete clinical instruction to its students that is irrelevant to the positions students will ultimately hold. In Kearney and Herrington's (2013) first study, researchers conducted semi-structured interviews of 10 newly hired assistant principals to uncover participants' opinions about how the program prepared them for their new roles and how they thought the program could be improved. Kearney and Herrington's (2013) second study, conducted a year later, sought the same information using the same methodology but believed participants' responses to be more informed because participants had been in their assistant principal roles for an entire year. The researchers asked participants how they felt their educational leadership program prepared them for their current positions as school administrators and if they had any information to share that might be useful when teaching future program students. Ultimately, study participants reported that their year-long experience in their new roles revealed that their educational leadership program did not offer any realistic preview of the job. Though they had learned much information, much of it did not prepare them for aspects of the jobs they would later hold (Kearney & Herrington, 2013).

Kearney and Herrington (2013) highlighted three approaches to educational leadership preparation programs they discovered during their studies:

- The University of Louisville requires a principal's nomination for admission into their program,

- East Tennessee State University requires the completion of 540 internship hours, and
- Students at California State University at Fresno must participate in exit interviews at the end of each semester with program faculty and district supervisors to ensure preparation for school leadership.

Kearney and Herrington (2013) discussed the approaches to emphasize the importance of the educational leadership program students having access to information and experiences they will later need and utilize in their respective leadership roles. Although instructional leadership is not the center of the discussion, the implication is that access to authentic learning experiences with and from effective instructional leaders should, in theory, transfer to the educational leadership program student (Kearney & Herrington, 2013).

Kearney and Herrington (2013) then made a case for an authentic learning experience called Realistic Job Preview (RJP). RJP aims to fully inform on a particular job before stepping into the role. The researchers recommended that educational leadership programs use the RJP model by utilizing administrators on campuses with applicants to assess and share what the job entails and what challenges they face. With this approach, and as it relates to instructional leadership, Kearney and Herrington (2013) suggested that RJP would better equip assistant principals to anticipate their responsibilities and, perhaps, better prepare them for the fullness of the position they seek.

Professional Development

Once placed in the role, assistant principals receive new learning through job-related experiences and professional development provided by the school or division (Barnett et al., 2017; Gurley et al., 2015; Master et al., 2020). Training ranges from mentorships, school-led professional development, and professional development led by outside organizations (Barnett et

al., 2017; Master et al., 2020). Professional development may also result from partnerships between school divisions and educational leadership programs collaborating to provide focused, standards-based learning for assistant principals (Gurley et al., 2015).

Allen and Weaver (2014) began by investigating assistant principals' specific professional development needs to support their leadership development. The researchers conducted a mixed-methods study of assistant principals in Northern Kentucky using a 5-point Likert-scale survey instrument to inquire about 31 functions of leadership from the 2008 ISLLC Standards (Allen & Weaver, 2014). Sixty-six of the 104 assistant principals in the region participated in the survey sharing their opinions about the importance of certain leadership behaviors and their actual performance or perceived proficiency in the same areas. The researchers evaluated assistant principals' ratings of importance and proficiency by conducting a Wilcoxon matched-pairs signed-ranks test with an alpha level of significance of 0.05. Allen and Weaver (2014) used this specific statistical test to compare the two paired groups (importance and performance/proficiency) and determine if sets of pairs were statistically significantly different.

Allen and Weaver (2014) found statistically significant differences between assistant principals' ratings of importance and proficiency in all 31 pairs of leadership behaviors. *Z-scores* ranged from -6.515 to -3.283. Maximizing time on quality instruction had the most statistically significant difference in importance and performance/proficiency. Other behaviors with the highest statistically significant differences include data review and fiscal management. Modeling self-awareness, reflective practice, transparency, and ethical behavior had the lowest statistically significant difference. The researchers interpreted these and other data to mean assistant principals acknowledge the importance of all 31 functions of the 2008 ISLLC Standards.

However, they do not perform them or believe they have mastered the related leadership skills (Allen & Weaver, 2014). Furthermore, the researchers used the data to suggest how educational leadership programs and school divisions can better develop assistant principals (Allen & Weaver, 2014).

Allen and Weaver (2014) used their research findings to collaborate with educational leadership faculty and school leaders to develop a network of assistant principals who will receive professional development according to their needs. The researchers described the professional development plan:

We planned a series of monthly professional development opportunities on topics such as school finance, time management, issues of school culture, instructional leadership, and special education in online, hybrid and face-to-face formats. Additionally, an online community was established to allow participants to network, discuss, share ideas, pose questions, connect with experts, find resources, etc. – a community that we hope will span far beyond the scope of this project. (Allen & Weaver, 2014, p. 25)

Allen and Weaver (2014) recommended aligning professional development frameworks and national leadership standards. The researchers suggested that this method would allow assistant principals to develop in areas based on standards they encounter in educational leadership programs; the approach would allow professional growth to occur on a continuum that begins in educational leadership coursework and continues while on the job (Allen & Weaver, 2014).

Gurley, Anast-May, and Lee (2015) explored the impact of the relationship between educational leadership preparation programs and job-embedded training. The researchers conducted a single-case qualitative study of an assistant principal development academy (AP Academy). The university's school district and educational leadership faculty partnered to

develop a two-year development program. Participants were assistant principals who participated in ongoing sessions with district and university professionals. The study's theoretical framework was based on Murphy's 1988 assertions about instructional leadership—a framework that resulted from Murphy's studies with Hallinger (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Murphy, 1988). The framework for instructional leadership consisted of four core practices: developing the school's mission and goals, managing the function of the educational program, promoting an academic learning climate, and maintaining a supportive work environment (Murphy, 1988). The study by Gurley et al. (2015) sought to determine and discuss the implementation and effectiveness of the AP Academy using Murphy's framework of instructional leadership.

By observing, interviewing, and surveying a sample of the AP Academy's 50 participants, the researchers sought to learn how the program impacted practicing assistant principals (Gurley et al., 2015). Participants reported that the AP Academy strengthened their skills and knowledge of school district function, collaboration as a tool for utilizing technology to improve their practice, and instructional leadership. Specifically, observing instruction and providing teachers with meaningful feedback was most beneficial to their practice as instructional leaders. The study by Gurley et al. (2015) of the AP Academy has implications that can be applied universally. Assistant principals can improve all skills and knowledge, including instructional leadership, if they are developed by dedicated professionals on an ongoing basis while serving in the role (Gurley et al., 2015).

Hutchinson (2017) further investigated the school district's role in instructional leaders' development. The researcher conducted a qualitative expository study of 51 participants, including central office staff involved in teaching and learning in the district and sitting principals and assistant principals in six public schools in a northeastern state. The researcher

interviewed the participants to determine how they perceived central office work to support or hinder development as instructional leaders. The study revealed that the central office was more integral in developing the academic program and maintaining the system's functions and operations. However, Hutchinson (2017) also found that the central office could not unite school administrators collegially and did not promote collaborative work processes. Considering Gurley et al.'s (2015) study of an AP Academy, the central office's ability to unite school administrators and promote a collaborative work climate was necessary for assistant principals to learn from education professionals and university professionals and further develop as instructional leaders.

As previously discussed, assistant principals benefit from professional development provided by other educational professionals (Gurley et al., 2015). Gurley et al. (2015) also found that a partnership between a school division and an educational leadership preparation program benefited assistant principals early in their careers. In contrast, Hutchinson (2017) discovered challenges in a school division's ability to meet the needs of school leaders' instructional leadership growth. A broader look at how schools and school systems work to develop their leaders, specifically in instructional leadership, provides models for success and insights into missed opportunities for leadership growth.

Barnett, Shoho, and Okilwa (2017) studied assistant principals' perceptions of mentoring and professional development opportunities. The researchers found that mentoring alone did not provide assistant principals with sufficient learning and growth opportunities in instructional leadership. Although job-embedded training allowed school systems to develop their school leaders while actively on the job, the 69 assistant principal participants reported that mentorships did not provide them with training specific to instructional leadership in a meaningful manner (Barnett et al., 2017). Participants reported that they found mentorships most beneficial when

paired with principals or other leaders they knew and respected. Mentorships positively affected assistant principals' decision-making and ability and their ability to establish and maintain their professional values (Barnett et al., 2017).

Studies by Allen and Weaver (2014), Barnett et al. (2017), and the previously discussed study by Gurley et al. (2015) provide specific examples of how to develop assistant principals as instructional leaders. Each of the studies uncovered ways schools and their larger systems are involved in the instructional leadership development of their assistant principals and to what degree. Another approach to developing assistant principals comes from sources outside the school system.

The Rand Corporation studied the PLUS (Pathway to Leadership in Urban Schools) program and its implementation in a U.S. school district (Master et al., 2020). The PLUS program aimed to purposefully provide assistant principals with professional learning and opportunities to lead instruction in schools. Master, Steiner, Doss, and Acheson-Field (2020) added that the program was state-approved and funded for APs who participated in the two-year job-embedded leadership development program. The school division would take over management of the program from the company after a three-year transition period (Master et al., 2020). Assistant principals in the PLUS program (PLUS APs) participated in ongoing professional development from PLUS staff and took on additional instructional leadership responsibilities in their schools. PLUS APs worked with their principals to identify a caseload of five teachers they would lead through regular observations and instructional coaching (Master et al., 2020). PLUS APs were evaluated and received annual ratings resulting from a formal performance assessment.

The researchers studied the first three assistant principal cohorts during the first four years of the PLUS program's implementation in one U.S. school district (Master et al., 2020). Their research questions included inquiries into the features of the PLUS program and how it compares to district practices for hiring and training assistant principals. Questions were also related to the program's implementation and its effects on its leaders' careers (Master et al., 2020).

Discoveries made from responses to two research questions provided insight into the intentions and success of the program (Master et al., 2020). One specific component of the PLUS program included providing instructional leadership development with an emphasis on teacher support and development. Professional development specific to observing and providing feedback to teachers of all skill levels was essential to training. More specifically, PLUS APs improved teacher efficacy and retention by learning how to coach high-performing teachers, have courageous conversations with low-performing teachers, and support them as they sought other employment opportunities (Master et al., 2020). PLUS APs received coaching from PLUS staff initially, but assistant principals who matriculated through the program became coaches, making the professional development model sustainable from within the school district. PLUS APs also practiced instructional leadership by coaching a caseload of teachers to improve their professional practice (Master et al., 2020).

The researchers discovered that PLUS APs positively impacted teacher performance and retention and, thus, student performance (Master et al., 2020). Master et al. (2020) found that students of 65 teachers coached by PLUS APs outperformed their peers in classrooms with teachers not supported by PLUS APs in language arts; gains in math achievement were not likely due to the sample size of 43 teachers. The researchers concluded that implementing the PLUS

AP program led to a shift in focus for the school district (Master et al., 2020). The program influenced the selection of assistant principals, the instructional leadership expectations of those assistant principals, and the school district's ability to develop its leaders as instructional leaders on its own (Master et al., 2020). According to Master et al. (2020), the PLUS Program serves as a model for the instructional leadership development of assistant principals. The researchers reported that assistant principals in one U.S. school district benefited from ongoing, job-embedded, self-sustaining instructional leadership professional development (Master et al., 2020).

Investigations into the professional development of assistant principals revealed that schools and their larger school systems provide new learning in various ways. Studies in this review highlighted efforts to provide job-embedded training from mentors, programs explicitly designed for assistant principals in partnership with educational leadership preparation programs, and programs designed in partnership with outside organizations (Barnett et al., 2017; Gurley et al., 2015; Master et al., 2020). Assistant principals in these studies reported experiencing benefits from each type of professional development opportunity but training initially provided by an outside organization resulted in results most meaningful to the development of assistant principals as instructional leaders (Master et al., 2020). Allen and Weaver's (2014) professional development needs assessment study provided insight into what assistant principals believe to be critical about the job and how they view their actual contributions in those areas.

Expectations, Realities, and Perceptions of Assistant Principals as Instructional Leaders

In the absence of a universal definition and job description of the assistant principal's role in schools, Glanz (1994a) conducted a qualitative study of a stratified random sample of 200 elementary and middle school assistant principals to better inform on the topic. Through an

analysis of 164 survey responses received to open-ended questions about their current AP responsibilities, the responsibilities they believed they should have, and how they found satisfaction on the job, the researcher made conclusions about how the participants viewed the assistant principalship. Glanz (1994a) found,

over 90 percent of the respondents indicated that their chief duties included handling disruptive students, dealing with parental complaints, supervising lunch duty, scheduling coverages, and completing surveys, forms, book orders, and other kinds of administrative paper work. Curiously, APs in this survey were significantly underinvolved in staff development, teacher training, and curriculum development. (p. 284)

After additional research on the role of the assistant principal, Bigham (2014) suggested it might be necessary to deliberately rethink and redefine the assistant principal's role to reflect what the job entails more accurately. The assistant principal position is not generally regarded on its own, but rather it is considered a springboard to the position of principal. The researcher also submitted that the assistant principal's managerial role benefits leaders needing those skills; not every leader has exceptional managerial skills to accompany the now-expected instructional leadership skills. Bigham recommended that a title change might be appropriate, writing, "Rethink the title of Assistant Principal as an Operations Manager or Director of School Operations to more accurately communicate the expectations and long-term value of the job" (Bigham, 2014, para. 7). Furthermore, Bigham (2014) suggested there should be specific training for leaders seeking opportunities to manage a building and specific training for those focused on leading instruction.

In a quantitative study of secondary assistant principals in a midwestern state, Scott (2011) collected survey data from 283 assistant principals who completed a 59-item

questionnaire to answer research questions investigating the expectations and realities of assistant principals' tasks and competencies. Survey items fell into six categories: "management of school, community relations, leadership in staff personnel, instructional leader, student activities, [and] pupil personnel" (Scott, 2011, p. 66). Based on data interpreted from survey responses, secondary assistant principals in the study expected they would be most active in staff and pupil personnel and least active in tasks related to student activities (Scott, 2011).

Additionally, the researcher found similarities in the analysis of responses to two research questions; assistant principals reported that they lead staff and pupil personnel matters as expected. The researcher found statistical significance in responses to the second research question related to instructional leadership. "Actual job responsibilities [as instructional leaders] were statistically lower as compared to the expected job responsibilities" (Scott, 2011, p.110). Scott (2011) used descriptive statistics to interpret survey results from assistant principals and found that they did not consistently act as instructional leaders, although they expected they would in the role.

Militello, Fusarelli, Mattingly, and Warren (2015) sought to understand how assistant principals view themselves and their work. The researchers conducted a Q-methodology study of 56 acting assistant principals. They determined that the role is essentially a midmanagement position; the individual is responsible for general operations, organization logistics, student discipline, and staff supervision, with accountability added to the list of responsibilities in more recent years. Hoffert (2015) studied four recently appointed assistant principals to understand their transition experiences from classroom teacher to school leader. Among findings related to a person's knowledge, skills, and preparation for the role, Hoffert (2015) found that the four assistant principals believed the position was an entryway to upper-level administrative jobs,

which is synonymous with midmanagement positions in any industry. Shore and Walshaw (2016) conducted a qualitative study of 169 assistant principals to gain insight into how they perceived themselves in the role. Survey responses and group interviews yielded findings contrary to the studies by Militello et al. and Hoffert (Shore & Walshaw, 2016). Fifty-seven percent of the assistant principals who responded believed themselves in a career did not aspire to become principals and, therefore, did not view the assistant principal position as a middle management position. Also, assistant principals reported overwhelming satisfaction with their ability—and opportunity—to support teachers in the classroom. They believed they had a significant impact in this area of leadership due to "their ability to support and 'empower staff in gaining more knowledge to improve their teaching'" (Shore & Walshaw, 2016, p. 318).

As previously discussed, Glanz (1994b) presented the assistant principalship as a position intended to fill the need for a leadership presence in schools in the 1920s by someone other than the principal. From Glanz's perspective, individuals who filled this undefined role had many responsibilities ranging from managerial tasks that set them apart from teaching staff and allowed them to participate in schools' leadership teams. Additionally, assistant principals traditionally performed tasks that others could not—or would not—do, thus making them instrumental to the school's success and an asset to the larger school community (Austin, 1972).

The role of the assistant principal has evolved since the 1920s. Along with its evolution is the increase in relevance of other aspects of education, such as student achievement and educational equity. In their various roles, assistant principals influence the learning environment and, thus, influence students' opportunities for academic success (Goldring et al., 2021; Murphy, 2021; Somoza-Norton & Neumann, 2021).

Educational Equity

Underachieving students and a widening achievement gap are the consequences of inequitable learning environments and ineffective classroom instruction (Fleming, 2019; Grant, 2018; Kinard et al., 2019; Rubel, 2017; Commonwealth of Virginia Department of Education (VDOE), 2020; Zardoya, 2017). Literature about educational equity includes research summaries on how leaders influence student outcomes, affect change, and create conditions for equity (Fleming, 2019; Goldring et al., 2021; Grissom, Egalite, & Lindsay, 2021; Kinard et al., 2019; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Murphy, 2021; Rimmer, 2016; Somoza-Norton & Neumann, 2021). The National Equity Project (n.d.a) asserts that the path to students reaching their academic and social potential is equitable access to education, resources, and opportunities specific to their needs.

A literature review revealed that assistant principals serve in many capacities but that serving as equity-focused instructional leaders influences student achievement and helps narrow the opportunity gap (Goldring et al., 2021; Murphy, 2021; Somoza-Norton & Neumann, 2021; VanGronigen et al., 2021). Equity-focused instructional practices serve as a solutions-based approach to addressing the opportunity gap in schools by providing all students access to learning and support specific to their needs (Department of Education (DOE), n.d.a; Grant, 2018; National Equity Project, n.d.b). Equity-focused instructional leaders prioritize equity, utilizing evidence-based strategies for promoting equity in the classroom and throughout the learning environment (Fleming, 2019; Grant, 2018; Kinard et al., 2019; Rubel, 2017; VDOE, 2020; Zardoya, 2017).

The Opportunity Gap

Opportunity gaps refer to the student experience, such as access and opportunities in the learning environment, whereas unequal and inequitable student performance outcomes are known as achievement gaps (Great Schools Partnership, 2013a). Further explained, “the achievement gap is the persistent disparity in academic achievement between minority and disadvantaged students and their white counterparts” (Porter, 2022, para. 3). The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) (2021) reported that such gaps occur when there is a statistically significant difference between groups’ scores. Longitudinal data collected and provided by NAEP are commonly used to observe the breadth of academic achievement gaps between student groups (Porter, 2022). Since the 1950s, the spotlight has been on academic achievement gaps between students from different backgrounds (Ansell, 2011; Coleman et al., 1966; Grant, 2018).

Discussions of disparities in performance outcomes between white and black or Hispanic students are common in the literature. However, the conversation has evolved to consider other student factors, such as socioeconomic status and disability, that account for disparities in student performance (Porter, 2022). In a research brief, Barth (2016) reported that achievement gaps in public schools narrowed from 1990 through 2015, yet they persist. The author pointed out that a notable gap in math performance exists between poor students and wealthy peers (Barth, 2016). Barth (2016) attributed this achievement gap to funding, curriculum, teacher quality, and school discipline inequities. The academic achievement gap goes beyond grades and standardized test scores and extends into course selection, dropout rates, college enrollment, and college completion rates (Ansell, 2011). Legislation, such as the No Child Left Behind Act of

2001 and the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, has increased accountability for student achievement to minimize and ultimately close student achievement gaps.

The literature presents an alternative perspective of the achievement gap through the lenses of students' school and learning experiences rather than performance outcomes (DOE, n.d.a; Flores, 2007). The "opportunity gap refers to inputs—the unequal or inequitable distribution of resources and opportunities" (Great Schools Partnership, 2013b, p. 1). In a study investigating disparities in mathematics education, Flores (2007) reframed the achievement gap as an opportunity gap. Inequitable student mathematics performance outcomes were attributable to inequitable mathematics learning opportunities inherent in an environment where students do not have equitable access to experienced teachers, adequate funding, and staff that maintain high expectations for all students (Flores, 2007). Inequities among ethnic groups due to school quality and educational opportunity were discussed at length years prior by Coleman et al. (1966) in *Equality of Educational Opportunity* after passing the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Similarly, in a discussion addressing inequities in student performance outcomes, Porter (2022) suggested that students' opportunity and access to learning are at the core of achievement gaps.

Educational equity is the means through which students have access to what is needed to reach their individual academic and social potential (NEP, n.d.a). Educational equity provides students equitable access to appropriate learning, resources, and all relevant opportunities that will lead to their success. In a paper on the importance of educational equity in K-12 schools, Thompson and Thompson (2018) contended,

equitable schools are models of deeper learning that incorporate a continuum of educational competencies for both the student and the school. Equal access is only the first step; equal treatment, appreciation of one's own cultural [sic] and the cultures of

others, equitable compensation and resources, and shared values that accept the presence of diverse racial, cultural, economic and social groups are just as important. (p. 42)

Educational equity narrows the gaps in opportunity that contribute to the persistence of achievement gaps (Grant, 2018; Hofmann, 2021; National Equity Project (NEP), n.d.a; Thompson & Thompson, 2018; VDOE, 2020; Waterford.org, 2020). Schools that operate with equity in mind engage in deliberate practices and behaviors that maximize opportunities for all students and thus minimize performance gaps among them (Fleming, 2019; Grant, 2018; Kinard et al., 2019; Rubel, 2017; Thompson & Thompson, 2018; Virginia Department of Education (VDOE), 2020; Zardoya, 2017).

Leading for Equity

Literature about equity-focused leadership discusses how leaders create conditions for equity and influence student learning (Fleming, 2019; Grissom et al., 2021; Kinard et al., 2019; Leithwood et al., 2004; Rimmer, 2016). The focus on equity in education originates from the awareness of the consequences of a recognized gap in opportunities for marginalized students (Rimmer, 2016). Much of the disparity in opportunity results from the shift in the nation's demographics that did not bring about an equivalent shift in the education system (Kinard et al., 2019). A few examples of inequitable opportunities include access to a quality preschool educational program, the best teachers, and rigorous, relevant learning experiences (Grissom et al., 2021; Kinard et al., 2019; Rimmer, 2016). As previously discussed, such missed opportunities contribute to gaps in student achievement between various student groups (Grant, 2018; Rimmer, 2016).

In a summary report on two decades of research on how principals affect students and schools, Grissom, Egalite, and Lindsay (2021) reported that developments in education-related

policies and increased expectations since the enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 changed the work of school leaders. However, school leaders' focus has been and remains to be developing people, promoting learning, and managing the organization (Grissom et al., 2021; Leithwood et al., 2004). An equity-focused leader is keenly aware that the three main priorities should function together for the benefit of students (Grissom et al., 2021). In a paper outlining the development of equity-focused instructional leaders, Rimmer (2016) presented a four-dimension leadership framework for improving the quality of instruction, which includes 1) establishing a vision, mission, and learning-focused culture, 2) improvement of instructional practices, 3) allocation of resources, and 4) management of systems and processes. Similarly, Grissom et al. (2021) reported that creating a culture that celebrates diversity, supporting teachers to better connect with all students, developing a robust instructional program, and appropriately allocating personnel and resources are behaviors of an equity-focused leader (Grissom et al., 2021).

A leader with a clear vision and mission centered on equitable student outcomes believes that all students can succeed if given the necessary and appropriate tools within the learning environment (Grissom et al., 2021; Leithwood et al., 2004; Rimmer, 2016). The diverse needs of students, a willingness to meet them, and structures that make it possible to meet their needs are at the core of the school's climate (Grissom et al., 2021; Rimmer, 2016). "The principal must foster a learning-focused culture, based upon data-driven goals that establish high-performance expectations for students and adults, and a climate of respect for every person, and for collaborative work" (Rimmer, 2016, para. 11). Collaboration with families and the larger school community to practice inclusivity and improve cultural competency is a vital component of an equity-focused environment (Kinard et al., 2019).

Instructional practice must improve student outcomes (Grissom et al., 2021; Leithwood et al., 2004; Rimmer, 2016). "Achieving this goal begins with the leader using a research-based instructional framework which describes the essential elements of quality, equitable instruction and is used to create a shared vision and a common language among all educators" (Rimmer, 2016, para.12). In a review of research on the influence of leadership on student learning, researchers found that school improvement and reform efforts begin with improving teaching and learning for all students (Leithwood et al., 2004). Similarly, Grissom et al. (2021) reported that equity-focused leaders consider how their instructional leadership of teachers promotes equity throughout the school community. Rimmer (2016) reported that equitable instructional practices include "culturally responsive instruction, a classroom culture of respect, differentiation, scaffolding, students' engagement in self-assessment, 'accountable talk,' and authentic intellectual work" (para. 14). Equity-focused leaders encourage teachers to identify alternative instructional strategies, provide relevant professional learning, and create appropriate systemic structures to support the most marginalized students (Grissom et al., 2021). Leaders also observe teachers and collect data to know if teachers deliver equitable instruction; they provide feedback and coaching when teachers' efforts appear ineffective (Rimmer, 2016).

Rimmer (2016) suggested that principals consider equity when allocating resources, including personnel. The author suggested that leading for equity involves hiring, assigning, or re-assigning teachers based on the school's specific needs each year (Rimmer, 2016). Grissom et al. (2021) reported that assigning higher-quality teachers to classrooms with lower-performing or marginalized students is a characteristic of schools with improved student achievement. The distribution of various resources impacts the school community and its stakeholders; therefore, it is a crucial component of equity-focused leadership (Rimmer, 2016). Rimmer (2016) claimed,

"Effective leaders therefore use data to make strategic decisions about allocating these resources. They work collaboratively with staff and use a continuous cycle of analysis to examine, assess and then refine the use of resources" (Rimmer, 2016, para. 18).

Processes and programs within the larger school are also relevant to an equity-focused leader (Rimmer, 2016). Equity-focused leaders create structures and processes that promote collegiality founded on communication, collaboration, and accountability (Rimmer, 2016). Leaders of such systems create a school community that values all stakeholders and strategically engages them in processes that require collaboration (Grissom et al., 2021).

In a professional learning module on creating conditions for equity, Kinard, Pickett, and Shchetynska (2019) suggested that leaders encourage staff to consider the achievement gap and opportunity gaps through an equity lens that recognizes the need for systems and practices that support every student. The authors also suggested that equity-focused leadership practices include establishing a distributed leadership model and developing a data review system to find connections between opportunity gaps and resulting achievement gaps (Kinard et al., 2019). Grissom et al. (2021) maintained,

the adoption of an equity lens inspires school leaders to reconsider their leadership behaviors in light of equity considerations, asking questions such as how their actions will remove barriers and create opportunities for historically underserved groups, how their behaviors will promote access to critical resources and supports for the success of all students, and how their practices will confront institutional factors that may be currently inhibiting certain members of the school community from achieving their full potential. (p. 74)

Leaders who operate from a lens of equity connect their leadership beliefs to behaviors that create an equitable learning environment and benefit all students (Grissom et al., 2021).

Equity-focused leadership is a systematic approach to meeting the specific needs of the people and effectively managing the whole school program (Grissom et al., 2021; Leithwood et al., 2004; Rimmer, 2006). School divisions and organizations create equity frameworks for their schools and leaders to provide structure and guidance for equity-related work. Equity frameworks require leaders to assess the need of the people and the school and do the intentional work to meet them (Building Equitable Learning Environments [BELE] Network, n.d.; Fabillar, 2018; NEP, n.d.b; VDOE, 2020). Educational equity frameworks unite the belief system with actions that increase students' opportunities and foster equitable student outcomes (BELE Network, n.d.; Fabillar, 2018; NEP, n.d.b; VDOE, 2020).

Educational equity frameworks across school divisions and organizations are not identical; however, the literature reveals trends in the composition and function of such frameworks. Table 1 lists learning contexts and conditions and their associated equity-focused actions or characteristics as presented by the nationally recognized BELE Network (BELE Network, n.d.).

Table 1

Building Equitable Learning Environments (BELE) Framework

Learning Context and Conditions	Action or Characteristic
Teaching and Learning	<p>Nurture student agency, self-directed learning, and critical consciousness</p> <p>Provide frequent, formative, growth-oriented feedback that affirms high academic expectations and support for all students</p> <p>Facilitate community building, routines, and rituals that reduce stress, address trauma, promote healing and belonging, and prepare the brain for learning</p> <p>Represent, affirm, and support students to explore their personal, cultural, racial, and academic identities and proactively dispel stereotypes</p> <p>Systematically gather and value students' feedback on and input into their learning experiences in school</p>
Schoolwide Systems and Structures	<p>School structures and practices promote student leadership and agency</p> <p>Differentiated opportunities for students to develop and demonstrate mastery, with punitive or discriminatory grading practices identified and eliminated</p> <p>Time and learning opportunities are flexibly designed and organized to prioritize student experience and learning goals, including cultivating supportive relationships and authentic learning</p> <p>School and classroom spaces are inviting, physically and emotionally safe, and support learning and engagement of all stakeholders</p> <p>Systematic use of a broad range of disaggregated quantitative and qualitative data to enhance equitable opportunity, experience, and success</p> <p>Professional processes, structures, and cultures build the individual and collective efficacy of educators and staff while supporting their personal well-being and providing opportunities for ongoing inquiry and critical reflection</p> <p>All school efforts, structures, resources, and people align around a clear, schoolwide vision of equitable learning and development and a shared understanding of why and how this drives everyone's work</p> <p>The goals of discipline policies and practices are to support student learning and development and to repair community rather than to punish or exclude students</p>
District and State Policies	<p>Structures and resources prioritize mastery and engagement to require and advance deeper learning</p> <p>Policies and resources support the hiring and development of staff who have the mindsets and skills to build equitable and effective learning environments</p> <p>Policies and resource allocations promote the development of school environments that support student safety, belonging, agency, wellness, and thriving</p> <p>Resources (e.g. funding, teachers, courses, early childhood education, etc.) are adequate and equitably distributed</p> <p>Approach policy making with a commitment to Targeted Universalism*</p> <p>System goals and aligned accountability policies focus on equitable whole student learning and development</p> <p>State and district data and accountability systems support site-level equity focused continuous improvement processes</p> <p>School leaders are held accountable for advancing these commitments while being given autonomy and ownership to find the most locally-appropriate path to fulfill those commitments</p> <p>Structures and requirements are in place to ensure authentic engagement of students, families, and communities in directing state and district policy and practice</p>
Family, Caregiver, and Community Partnerships	<p>Families and school staff work in authentic partnerships to develop and advance a shared definition of student success</p> <p>Families and school staff build meaningful relationships that foster mutual trust, understanding, and appreciation across cultures and other differences</p> <p>Share information and resources and collaborate across schools, families, and community partners in support of student learning and development</p> <p>Families and community members co-design and co-govern schools so that policies and practices are equitable and support all students</p>

Note. Adapted from "An Approach to Building Equitable Learning Environments" by the BELE Network, n.d..

(https://belenetwork.org/library_resources/the-bele-framework/).

Recognizing students' unique needs is at the center of educational equity frameworks (BELE Network, n.d.; Fabillar, 2018; NEP, n.d.b; VDOE, 2020). People, systems, and structures surround students and should work to close gaps in opportunities that inhibit student achievement (BELE Network, n.d.; Fabillar, 2018; NEP, n.d.b; VDOE, 2020). The pillars of educational equity frameworks commonly include a focus on teaching and learning, appropriate

management of systems and structures, partnerships among stakeholders, and policies that allow each pillar to function together for the benefit of students (BELE Network, n.d.; Fabillar, 2018; NEP, n.d.b; VDOE, 2020). Equity frameworks also include processes requiring the leader and school team to make observations, engage stakeholders at various levels, and address inequities in the system (BELE Network, n.d.; Fabillar, 2018; NEP, n.d.b).

EdEquityVA

In *Navigating EdEquityVA: Virginia's Road Map to Equity*, equity is the central priority for educators in Virginia (VDOE, 2020). Family engagement, social-emotional support, and academics are all centered around equity; none are as effective without equity at its core (VDOE, 2020). The VDOE (2020) identifies two equity priorities for its school divisions: closing opportunity gaps and increasing the cultural competency of Virginia's educator workforce. The EdEquityVA framework offers strategies for addressing the state's two equity priorities: closing opportunity gaps and increasing educators' cultural competency (VDOE, 2020). Table 2 lists the 18 equity-focused strategies for addressing the state's two equity priorities.

Table 2

EdEquityVA's Strategies for Addressing Two Equity Priorities

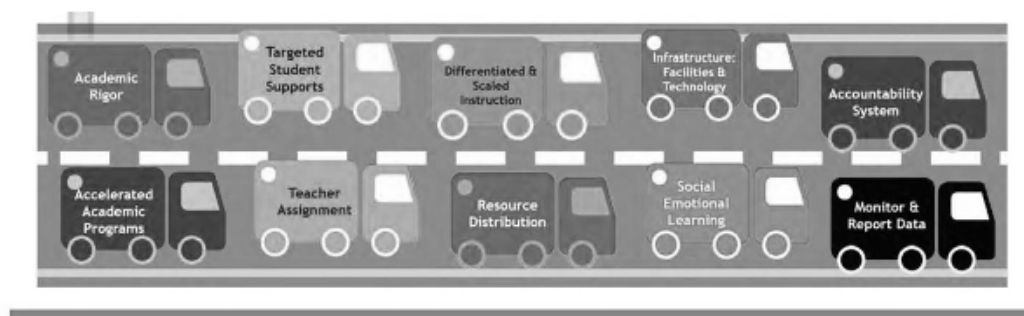
Equity Priority	Strategies	
Closing Opportunity Gaps	Academic Rigor	Monitor and Report Data
	Accelerated Academic Programs	Resource Distribution
	Accountability System	Social Emotional Learning
	Differentiated and Scaled Instruction	Targeted Student Supports
	Infrastructure: Facilities and Technology	Teacher Assignment
Increasing Educators' Cultural Competency	Courageous Leaders	Licensure Requirements
	Culturally Relevant Teaching	Professional Learning
	Educator Evaluation	School Climate
	Educator Preparation	Teacher Diversity

Note. Adapted from “Navigating EdEquityVA: Virginia’s Road Map to Equity” by Commonwealth of Virginia Department of Education, 2020. (<https://www.doe.virginia.gov/edequityva/navigating-equity-book.pdf>).

Strategies for closing the achievement gap should mitigate inequities, such as access to rigor and relevant learning opportunities in the classroom, access to appropriate supports that produce measurable positive results for all students, and lowered expectations for underrepresented or marginalized student groups (VDOE, 2020). Figure 2 illustrates the VDOE’s 10 equity-focused decisions, practices, and strategies for closing the opportunity gap.

Figure 2

EdEquityVA's Strategies for Addressing Equity Priority 1: Closing Opportunity Gaps



Opportunity gaps often manifest as: 1) lack of equitable and consistent access to rigorous courses and learning opportunities; 2) lack of access to high levels of support that measurably increase achievement levels for all students; and 3) lowered expectations for underrepresented/marginalized students.

Closing opportunity gaps in Virginia schools is the only way we will make progress toward eliminating the academic achievement gaps that separate many Black and Hispanic students from their White and Asian peers.

Our strategy will focus on the following tactics as the primary vehicles for **Closing Opportunity Gaps for Virginia Students**:

- Ensuring Academic Rigor and High Expectations for ALL Students
- Mitigating Enrollment Barriers for Under-represented Students into Accelerated, Advanced, and Selective, Academic Programs
- Resourcing Targeted Supports for Students
- Incentivizing Equitable Assignment of Experienced Teachers
- Tailoring TA to support Differentiated and Scaled Instruction
- Evaluating State Levers to Advance Equitable Resource Distribution
- Ensuring Equitable School Facilities and Technology Resources for ALL Students
- Developing and Implementing Social Emotional Learning Standards for Virginia
- Developing and Implementing Accountability for Equitable Educational Opportunities
- Monitoring & Reporting on Disproportionate Access and Outcome Data (Equity Dashboard)

Note. Adapted from “Navigating EdEquityVA: Virginia’s Road Map to Equity” by Commonwealth of Virginia Department of Education, 2020.

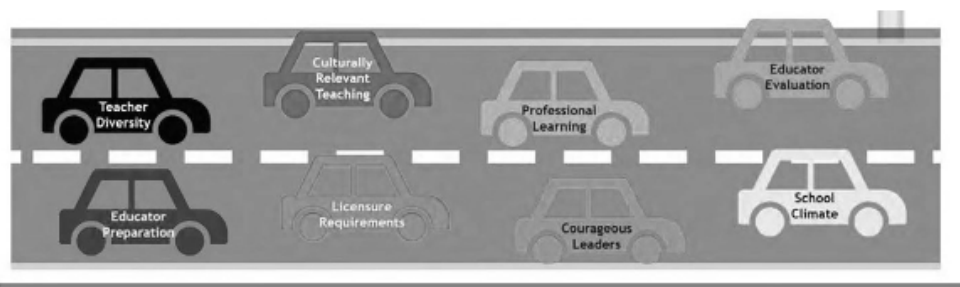
(<https://www.doe.virginia.gov/edequityva/navigating-equity-book.pdf>).

The EdEquityVA framework also offers eight strategies to increase Virginia educators’ cultural competency. Four of the eight strategies are instruction-focused behaviors and practices intended to influence attitudes and behaviors that impact instructional practice in the school

setting. Figure 3 illustrates the VDOE’s eight equity-focused decisions, practices, and strategies for increasing educators’ cultural competency.

Figure 3

EdEquityVA’s Strategies for Addressing Equity Priority 2: Increasing Virginia Educators’ Cultural Competency



Culture strongly influences the attitudes, values, and behaviors that students and teachers bring to the instructional process, making culturally responsive educators necessary for the equitable achievement of today’s increasingly diverse student population.

Culturally responsive educators see the diversity in their classrooms as an asset and use their knowledge on students’ backgrounds to enrich educational experiences. These educators form a thorough understanding of the specific cultures of the students they teach, how that culture affects student learning behaviors, and how they can change classroom interactions and instruction to embrace the differences.

Establishing expectations for culturally responsive practice among Virginia’s educator workforce is critical to ensuring inclusive learning environments and equitable outcomes for all students. Our strategy will focus on the following tactics as the primary vehicles for ***Increasing the Cultural Competency of Virginia’s Educator Workforce:***

- Increasing Teacher Diversity
- Supporting Culturally Relevant Teaching Pedagogy
- Enhancing Teacher Preparation
- Amending Licensure Requirements to include Cultural Competency
- Developing new Professional Learning Opportunities
- Supporting Courageous Leaders
- Revising Educator Evaluation to include Cultural Competency Efficacy
- Incorporating Cultural Responsiveness and Inclusion into School Climate Evaluation

Note. Adapted from “Navigating EdEquityVA: Virginia’s Road Map to Equity” by Commonwealth of Virginia Department of Education, 2020. (<https://www.doe.virginia.gov/edequityva/navigating-equity-book.pdf>).

The EdEquityVA framework is specific to Virginia but not unique to school divisions nationwide that prioritize equity in their systems. The strategies for addressing achievement gaps

and increasing teachers' cultural literacy are applicable in any educational setting. Equity-focused instructional leadership strategies from the EdEquityVA framework, the BELE framework, or any other equity-centered educational framework are relevant to any school system attempting to address gaps in student achievement through a lens of educational equity.

The evolution of the role of the assistant principal from manager to instructional leader came in response to an emphasis on accountability and the revelation of an apparent nationwide academic achievement gap (Glanz, 1994a, 1994b; Johnson, 2018). Thorough consideration of the causes of and solutions to the apparent achievement gap reveals that a likely barrier to student achievement is an opportunity gap, or rather, inequities in the education system (Carter & Welner, 2013; Grant, 2018; United States Department of Education (DOE), n.d.a). Equity-focused leadership practices are necessary to establish an equitable learning environment for students and thus improve student outcomes (Fleming, 2019; Grant, 2018; Kinard et al., 2019; Rubel, 2017; VDOE, 2020; Zardoya, 2017). Specifically, instructional leadership within an educational equity framework requires that school leaders be versed in culturally responsive teaching and be able to influence how equity manifests in classrooms (Fleming, 2019; Grant, 2018; Kinard et al., 2019; National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), 2018; Rubel, 2017; VDOE, 2020; Zardoya, 2017). In a compilation book of perspectives on equity in education, Hofmann (2021) succinctly explains what equity does for students, what equity accomplishes, and how to achieve it.

Equity in education ensures access for students from all backgrounds and all performance levels. The core of equity is about getting to know kids, understanding who they are and how to support them... Achieving equitable access for all kids requires that educators

focus on creating pathways for all kids, creating opportunities for all kids. (Hofmann, 2021, pp. 53-54)

Literature Review Summary

The role of the assistant principal is studied less frequently in educational research than the role of the principal (Cohen & Schechter, 2019). Research studies on assistant principals commonly investigate the preparation for the role, job responsibilities while in the role, or utilization of the role as preparation for a principalship (Austin, 1972; Austin & Brown, 1970; Barnett et al., 2012; Cohen & Schechter, 2019; Kelly, 1987; Leaf & Odhiambo, 2017; Militello et al., 2015). Studies about educational leadership behaviors and professional standards most frequently address leadership, in general, and do not specifically address assistant principals serving as instructional leaders, nor do they discuss the role of assistant principals on equity in the school program (Bridges, 1967; Hallinger & Wang, 2015).

Educational leadership program requirements align with state standards for educational leadership professionals and prepare leaders for the assistant principal's role. More generally, educational leadership programs prepare leaders to serve in various capacities within schools and school divisions (NPBEA, 2018). Available research studies on educational leadership preparation programs focused more generally on if and how prepared assistant principals felt for the role (James, 2017; Kearney & Herrington, 2013; Peters et al., 2016, Young et al., 2017). Instructional leadership capacity and practice of assistant principals remain under-investigated in the literature. Studies related to instructional leadership practice are rooted in investigations into how assistant principals view themselves (Bigham, 2014; Glanz, 1994a; Hoffert, 2015; Militello et al., 2015; Scott, 2011; Shore & Walshaw, 2016). Studies on assistant principals, specifically as equity-focused instructional leaders, and how significantly they affect student and school

outcomes were not available for this review. It is relevant to know if and how student achievement and teacher performance are directly affected by the assistant principal's equity-focused instructional leadership. More studies on how principals serve as equity-focused instructional leaders would also be insightful and inform how to prepare and develop assistant principals. Researchers identified behaviors and practices typical of principals serving as instructional leaders and leading for equity but notably excluded specific applications to assistant principals (Bridges, 1967; Edmonds, 1979; Grissom et al., 2021; Hallinger & Wang, 2015; Leithwood et al., 2004; Neumerski, 2012; Rimmer, 2006).

Gaps in the literature include studies on the role of assistant principals as equity-focused instructional leaders. Assistant principals as instructional leaders and educational equity are discussed independently in the literature, but investigations into how they function together are not widely available. Literature about educational equity discusses an appropriate solution to the achievement gap but does not explicitly speak to assistant principals. Instructional leadership capacity and practice of assistant principals remain under-investigated in the literature. Studies that reveal how assistant principals view the role and their work provide insight into their instructional leadership practices (Bigham, 2014; Glanz, 1994a; Hoffert, 2015; Militello et al., 2015; Scott, 2011; Shore & Walshaw, 2016). The literature did not reveal significant studies on assistant principals as equity-focused instructional leaders and how they affect students and school outcomes. It is relevant to know if and how the assistant principal's instructional leadership directly affects student achievement and teacher performance through an equity lens.

Additional gaps in the literature include further investigations into the influence of educational leadership preparation programs and school divisions on developing assistant principals as equity-focused instructional leaders. Gurley et al. (2015) studied one school

division's effort to better develop assistant principals during their first two years in the role. The study found that the AP Academy developed by a school division in partnership with educational leadership program faculty developed assistant principals who felt better supported and better prepared for the job's duties, including those related to instructional leadership. Master et al. (2020) studied a district's implementation of an assistant principal instructional leadership program; the study revealed that the program provided meaningful, long-term instructional leadership development to assistant principals. Additional studies investigating the collaboration of school divisions and educational leadership preparation programs or outside educational organizations that are equity-focused are necessary to understand their influence on assistant principals. Such studies would better inform how school divisions can meet the professional development needs of assistant principals.

Chapter Three

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to identify assistant principals' preparation, opportunity, and self-reported professional learning needs to serve as equity-focused instructional leaders. The researcher sought to answer three questions to inform on trends in assistant principals' perceptions of their preparation, opportunity, and perceived professional learning needs to serve as equity-focused instructional leaders, specifically through the lens of the EdEquityVA framework and the national BELE framework. This study utilized quantitative research inquiry procedures; in this case, the researcher designed and utilized a survey. Subsequently, the researcher used quantitative research methods to collect, analyze, interpret data, and report findings.

Chapter three presents the purpose of the study, the research questions, and the research design. The researcher also presents specifics about the desired data, sample selection, and data collection procedures in the chapter. The third chapter also describes the design instrument, addresses the instrument's validity and reliability, and outlines the study's timeline. The chapter also details how data was treated, managed, and analyzed.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify assistant principals' preparation, opportunity, and self-reported professional learning needs to serve as equity-focused instructional leaders. This study sought to learn if assistant principals believe they can influence instructional practice in their buildings and to what extent they do. As accountability remains a priority in education, progress toward improved, equitable student outcomes remains the focus for school leaders (DOE, n.d.a; Grant, 2018; Kinard et al., 2019; NEP, n.d.a; VDOE, 2020). Assistant principals'

ability and opportunity to influence instruction-focused decisions and teachers' instructional practice impact student outcomes (Glanz, 2004; Goldring et al., 2021; NEP, n.d.b; Somoza-Norton & Neumann, 2021). The results of this study aim to inform principals and district leaders on how to develop or how to better utilize assistant principals as equity-focused instructional leaders.

Research Questions

The focus of this study was to investigate self-perceptions of assistant principals' preparation, opportunity, and professional learning needs to serve as equity-focused instructional leaders through the lens of the EdEquityVA framework and the national BELE framework. The researcher used a survey to collect data that were analyzed to answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent do assistant principals perceive they are prepared to serve as equity-focused instructional leaders?
2. To what extent do assistant principals currently practice or supervise equity-focused instructional leadership behaviors?
3. What are assistant principals' self-reported professional learning needs to support or advance their equity-focused instructional leadership in their current or future roles?

Research Design and Rationale

Quantitative research approaches require quantitative research designs (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researcher utilized a survey research design for this quantitative study. Creswell and Creswell (2018) explain that a survey research design is a means for collecting data from a sample population. Survey research designs allow researchers to collect data from surveys

or questionnaires administered to a sample population that are analyzed to provide a quantifiable description of the sample that is used to generalize a larger population (Fowler, 2009). The researcher collected data from a cross-sectional survey administered over two weeks. Target participants were assistant (or associate or vice) principals in four school divisions in Virginia. The researcher sought data from survey responses intended to answer three research questions. After collecting survey data, the researcher utilized descriptive statistics to describe the results and empirical analysis to deduce findings and implications related to the research questions.

Needed Data

Data for this study were needed to answer three research questions about assistant principals' perceptions of their preparation, opportunity, and professional learning needs to serve as equity-focused instructional leaders. To conduct the study, the researcher developed a survey instrument and identified a sample population of assistant principals to serve as potential participants. The researcher referred to DOE actions and VDOE strategies for addressing equity in the educational setting (see Figures 2 and 3 and Tables 1 and 2) to identify equity-focused instructional leadership behaviors and develop survey items. Responses to the survey served as data later interpreted to answer the three research questions.

Site and Sample

The target sample for this study was assistant principals in four school divisions in Virginia. Assistant principals in this state may be known as associate or vice principals; all were considered assistant principals in this study. The school quality profiles for each division indicated that they vary in size, student demographics, and academic performance (VDOE,

n.d.c). Table 3 provides fall membership data for each school division and the state for the 2021-2022 school year.

Table 3

2021 Fall Membership Ranges by School Division

School Division	Number of Schools	Number of Students	White Students	Black Students	Hispanic Students	Asian Students	Mixed Race Students/Other Ethnicities	Students with Disabilities	Economically Disadvantaged Students	English Learners
School Division A	40-50	<45,000	40-50%	30-40%	10-20%	0-10%	0-10%	0-20%	30-40%	0-10%
School Division B	20-30	<20,000	20-30%	60-70%	0-10%	0-10%	0-10%	10-20%	40-50%	0-10%
School Division C	20-30	<20,000	70-80%	0-10%	0-10%	0-10%	0-10%	10-20%	20-30%	0-10%
School Division D	10-20	<15,000	10-20%	70-80%	0-10%	0-10%	0-10%	10-20%	50-60%	0-10%
State	1821	1,252,173	45.8%	21.8%	18.1%	7.4%	6.9%	13.6%	41.1%	12.9%

Note.

Data from School Division A, B, C, and D are adapted from <https://schoolquality.virginia.gov/>. Commonwealth of Virginia Department of Education.

Data for the state are adapted from <https://schoolquality.virginia.gov/virginia-state-quality-profile>. Commonwealth of Virginia Department of Education.

Table 4 provides Standards of Learning Assessment pass rates for each school division and the state in the five testing categories for the same year.

Table 4

2022 Pass Rate Ranges by School Division

School Division	Reading Pass Rate	Writing Pass Rate	Math Pass Rate	Science Pass Rate	History Pass Rate
School Division A	70-80%	70-80%	70-80%	70-80%	70-80%
School Division B	70-80%	60-70%	60-70%	60-70%	60-70%
School Division C	80-90%	60-70%	80-90%	70-80%	70-80%
School Division D	60-70%	40-50%	40-50%	40-50%	50-60%
State	73%	65%	66%	65%	66%

Note.

Data from School Division A, B, C, and D are adapted from <https://schoolquality.virginia.gov/>. Commonwealth of Virginia Department of Education.

Data for the state are adapted from <https://schoolquality.virginia.gov/virginia-state-quality-profile>. Commonwealth of Virginia Department of Education.

The State Department of Education (2021) lists eight regions that include 133 school divisions. The researcher chose four school divisions within the state due to their varied student populations and academic achievement levels. The four school divisions include over 100 schools serving over 90,000 students (VDOE, n.d.c). According to their respective division and school websites, each school lists at least one assistant principal on staff. The study's target population was assistant principals serving 100+ public schools in the four participating divisions (VDOE, 2021).

In their research of the literature on assistant principals, Somoza-Norton and Neumann (2021) assert that the role of assistant principal should “reflect an instructional and equitable leader actively seeking to ensure access and opportunity for all students” (p. 43). Assistant principals were the focus of the study due to their potential influence as school leaders and their proximity to teachers and students. Two hundred six assistant principals working in the four school divisions were prospective participants in this study. The researcher invited prospective participants to access and complete the survey voluntarily and anonymously. While 206 was a relatively large sample size, Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2007) suggested that researchers overestimate the sample size in cases where non-response and attrition might be likely. In this study, the researcher attempted to mitigate challenges resulting in insufficient or incomplete responses. The outcome was a sample of 65 assistant principals.

Using a multistage, or clustering, procedure, the researcher identified a cluster within the population—School Divisions A, B, C, and D in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Participants were a nonprobability sample of the cluster due to their ability to respond to the survey at their convenience within the survey window (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The assistant principals in

four school divisions were also a volunteer sample since they had the opportunity to self-select their participation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Data Collection and Gathering Procedures

Creswell and Creswell (2018) note that survey designs help researchers answer three types of questions, including descriptive questions. They write, "A survey design provides a quantitative description of trends, attitudes, and opinions of a population [...] by studying a sample of that population" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 207). This study used a survey research design that utilized a researcher-developed survey distributed to and voluntarily completed by the assistant principals in School Divisions A, B, C, and D.

The researcher requested written approval to conduct the study from the Virginia Polytechnic and Institute and State (Virginia Tech) Institutional Review Board (IRB) (see Appendix A). The researcher also requested and received approval to conduct the research from the Departments/Offices of Research and Evaluation from School Divisions A, B, C, and D (see Appendix B). Each school division's designated point of contact distributed the survey invitation to assistant principals via e-mail on the researcher's behalf or permitted the researcher to distribute the survey invitation to assistant principals directly via e-mail (see Appendix C).

The researcher developed an electronic survey using a web-based surveying tool, QuestionPro. Sue and Ritter (2012) note that online surveys are advantageous for researchers due to the speed with which they can be shared and returned, the negligible cost to create and share them, the convenience of creating and sharing them, and the ease of use for most online survey tools. The researchers also note that the number of e-mails and e-mail surveys participants receive, and the potential for the e-mail to be considered spam, might present challenges for researchers (Sue & Ritter, 2012). Recipients of the survey invitation received notification that the

survey was voluntary and that their responses would be anonymous and confidential. No identifying information would be collected or associated with their responses. The invitation informed participants that the survey was estimated to take 20 minutes. Participants had two weeks from when the school division designee or researcher sent invitations to respond to the survey.

Instrument Design

The researcher designed a survey, Perceptions of Assistant Principals' Equity-Focused Instructional Leadership Survey, for this research study (see Appendix D). The researcher developed a 23-item survey instrument with questions and statements designed to elicit responses about assistant principals' perceptions of their preparation, opportunity, and self-identified learning needs to serve as equity-focused instructional leaders (VDOE, 2020). The survey intended to produce data from responses that answered the three research questions.

To begin, item 1 of the survey asked one question about respondents' experience in the role of assistant principal. Data collected from item 1 served to describe the sample population. Questions 2-11 asked assistant principals about their preparation to practice or utilize strategies for achieving equity in schools according to the BELE framework and the EdEquityVA framework. Tables 1 and 2 outline equity-focused instructional leadership strategies, actions, and characteristics that foster equity in schools if implemented appropriately. Table 1 lists equitable practices and processes adapted from the BELE framework. Table 2 lists equitable practices adapted from the EdEquityVA framework designed to close the opportunity gap and increase Virginia's educators' cultural competency (VDOE, 2020). Responses to questions 2-11 about assistant principals' perceived preparation to serve as equity-focused instructional leaders were limited to ratings using a four-point Likert-type scale in which 1 = *unprepared*, 2 = *poorly*

prepared, 3 = *somewhat prepared*, and 4 = *very prepared*. Data collected from responses to items 2-11 of the survey were intended to answer research question one: to what extent do assistant principals perceive they are prepared to serve as equity-focused instructional leaders?

The survey continued with 10 questions requiring respondents to indicate self-perceptions about their opportunities to serve as equity-focused instructional leaders utilizing the same practices and strategies referenced in questions 2-11. Responses to items 12-21 were limited to ratings using a four-point Likert-type scale in which 1 = *never*, 2 = *rarely*, 3 = *often*, and 4 = *always*. Data from responses to items 12-21 of the survey aimed to answer research question two: to what extent do assistant principals currently practice or supervise equity-focused instructional leadership behaviors or processes?

Item 22 of the survey asked participants to select three equity-focused instructional leadership practices about which professional learning might benefit them in their current or future roles. Item 23 was an open-ended question allowing participants to input their equity-focused instructional leadership learning needs. Data from items 22 and 23 aimed to answer research question three: what are assistant principals' self-reported professional learning needs to support or advance their equity-focused instructional leadership in their current or future roles?

Instrument Validity and Reliability

"Quantitative research possesses a measure of standard error which is inbuilt and which has to be acknowledged" (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007, p. 133). Validity and reliability are mechanisms through which a researcher measures an instrument's suitability for the study.

Validity measures the accuracy of an instrument's data based on the instrument's components.

Reliability measures an instrument's consistency, dependability, and replicability (Cohen et al., 2007).

The researcher-developed survey instrument was measured for content validity and construct validity. Cohen et al. (2007) state that content validity exists when the instrument "fairly and comprehensibly" measures what it claims to measure (p. 137). To measure the content validity of the researcher-developed survey instrument, the researcher shared the research questions matrix (see Appendix E) and the survey with fellow education professionals and fellow education research students. The researcher sought feedback from six colleagues and four classmates on the relevance and language of survey items, the Likert-type scale format, and the suitability of response options. The 10 individuals received a copy of the survey and matrix; they subsequently shared feedback with the researcher. The researcher used their feedback to determine if the survey instrument and items would produce relevant data appropriate for answering the three research questions.

The researcher requested that the same colleagues and classmates refer to their copy of the survey and review *Navigating EdEquityVA: Virginia's Road Map to Equity* manual, focusing on the strategies of the two equity priorities related to the survey items to measure the instrument's construct validity. The researcher also shared the BELE framework with the same panel to provide additional insight into equity-focused leadership practices. The researcher wanted to know if the survey items adapted from the equity strategies accurately reflect equity-focused instructional leadership practices according to what they were presumed to know about equity, instructional leadership, and goals set by the VDOE and DOE. The researcher then sought confirmation of the appropriateness of the survey items or recommendations to modify or exclude survey items based on the panel's resources and knowledge (Cohen et al., 2007). The panel's feedback informed the researcher that the instrument had sufficient construct validity and

appropriately measured equity-focused instructional leadership behaviors adapted from the BELE framework and the EdEquityVA framework.

The researcher measured the instrument's reliability prior to conducting the study. "Reliability in quantitative research is essentially a synonym for dependability, consistency, and replicability over time, over instruments, and groups of respondents" (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 146). Due to time constraints, the researcher measured the instrument's internal consistency, which is "the degree to which sets of items on an instrument behave in the same way...[and] instrument scale items [assess] the same construct" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 215). The researcher tested the instrument's reliability as internal consistency using Cronbach Alpha (α), also known as the alpha coefficient of reliability, or the Alpha for short (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). "The Cronbach alpha provides a coefficient of inter-item correlations, that is, the correlation of each item with the sum of all the other relevant items, and is useful for multi-item scales" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 148). Cronbach's alpha (α) value ranges from 0 to 1; values from .7 to .9 are considered ideal (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Twenty items in the researcher-developed survey were questions or statements that elicited responses on four-point Likert-type scales. A test of the researcher-developed survey's internal consistency yielded an Alpha (α) of .81, which fell in the ideal range.

Data Treatment

Before conducting this research study, the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board required the researcher to complete the human subjects review process to ensure that this research involving human subjects was appropriate according to the standards set by the IRB.

The *Certificate of Completion of the Collaborative Institutional Training (CITI)*

Program certifies that the researcher completed training on September 26, 2020 (see Appendix

F). The *Implied Consent Agreement* was provided to participants (see Appendix G); it outlined the purpose of the study, the voluntary, anonymous nature of the survey, participants' rights, and the confidentiality of the survey's data. The *Implied Consent Agreement* informed participants that participating in the survey was consent.

The electronic survey in this study was available to the sample population by invitation only. Neither the survey nor its responses were available via results found in online searches. Respondents were only able to submit the survey once to maintain the integrity of the survey process. Responses collected via the survey were anonymous; respondents' IP addresses, location data, and contact information were not accessible to the researcher.

Data Management

The researcher distributed the electronic QuestionPro survey to participants with permission from the four school divisions' Departments/Offices of Research and Evaluation. Upon receiving an invitation to complete the survey from the divisions or the researcher, respondents had two weeks to complete the survey. Responses were stored and only available to the researcher on the researcher's password-protected QuestionPro account and later downloaded as an Excel file to the researcher's password-protected computer. The researcher maintained this study's data and analyses until the completion of this study and dissertation defense. After which, all data and analyses were deleted and destroyed.

Data Analysis Plan

The researcher analyzed the data to answer the study's three research questions. The researcher used descriptive statistics to describe and summarize survey responses according to research questions one, two, and three. The researcher used survey responses to identify how

assistant principals perceive their preparation and opportunity to serve as equity-focused instructional leaders through means, percentages, frequency of responses, and standard deviations.

Timeline

In February 2022, the researcher submitted the study proposal to the dissertation committee chair for review. The researcher completed the Prospectus Examination in March 2022 and proceeded with the study's next steps. Next, the researcher requested and received IRB approval in July 2022. In September and October 2022, the appropriate personnel in the subject school divisions received and forwarded survey invitations to their active assistant principals or granted the researcher permission to send them. The survey was available to participants to complete voluntarily and anonymously for two weeks. After the survey window, the researcher spent subsequent weeks gathering data, analyzing survey results, identifying the study's findings, and determining implications for practice and future research.

Methodology Summary

This study aimed to identify assistant principals' preparation, opportunity, and self-reported professional learning needs to serve as equity-focused instructional leaders. The researcher used quantitative research methods to identify study participants and inquiry methods to answer three research questions about assistant principals' perceptions of their preparation, opportunity, and perceived professional learning needs to serve as equity-focused instructional leaders. Such leadership practices were adapted from the EdEquityVA framework and the national BELE framework. The researcher identified assistant principals in Virginia as the population of interest and utilized a multistage procedure to identify a sample to participate in

the study. The researcher designed a 23-item survey with questions and statements to obtain responses to inform on assistant principals' perceived preparation, opportunity, and professional learning needs. Subsequently, the researcher used quantitative research methods to collect, analyze, interpret data, and report findings.

Chapter Four

Results of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify assistant principals' preparation, opportunity, and self-reported professional learning needs to serve as equity-focused instructional leaders. This study utilized quantitative research inquiry procedures; in this case, the researcher developed and utilized a 23-item survey designed to elicit responses that answered three research questions:

1. To what extent do assistant principals perceive they are prepared to serve as equity-focused instructional leaders?
2. To what extent do assistant principals currently practice or supervise equity-focused instructional leadership behaviors or processes?
3. What are assistant principals' self-reported professional learning needs to support or advance their equity-focused instructional leadership in their current or future roles?

Survey items were adapted from the national BELE framework and Virginia's EdEquityVA framework. They were posed as questions to gain insight into assistant principals' perceived preparation and involvement in equity-focused instructional leadership behaviors or practices. Assistant principals were also asked to share learning interests that might benefit them in their current or future leadership roles. Subsequently, the researcher used quantitative research methods to collect and analyze data and later interpret the data and report findings.

This chapter presents quantitative and qualitative data from a sample of 65 assistant principals from four school divisions in Virginia. The quantitative data include descriptive statistics in means, percentages, and frequency of Likert-type scale responses to 21 questions intended to answer the first two research questions. Quantitative and qualitative data collected

from two survey items are presented to answer the third research question. These data were gathered from one multiple-selection survey item and one survey item that allowed for open-ended responses from participants. One survey item was presented in the first section to capture the study participants' experience level and describe the study's sample. Together, the data presented in this chapter answer the three research questions about assistant principals' preparation, opportunity, and professional learning needs to serve as equity-focused instructional leaders.

Data Reporting and Analysis

This study's sample size (n) consisted of 65 assistant principals from four school divisions in Virginia. The researcher requested permission from each school division to distribute the survey to all assistant principals. Upon approval, the researcher was either provided a list of assistant principals' e-mail addresses in each school division, or the researcher was permitted to acquire them independently. The researcher sent electronic survey invitations to 206 assistant principals in the four school divisions. Prospective participants were informed that the survey was accessible for two weeks, responses would be confidential and anonymous, and completing the survey implied consent. Each school division had a two-week window to complete the survey; not all divisions had the same two weeks. After each division's survey window, the survey was sent to 206 prospective participants and was viewed 190 times. At least one survey response was received from a total of 65 participants, indicating a response rate of 31.55%. However, just 53 participants completed the survey; 12 out of 65 participants started but failed to complete the survey or submit the survey upon completion. Survey analytics from the QuestionPro platform indicated that the survey had an 81.54% completion rate. The average time to complete the survey was 9 minutes.

The researcher-developed survey, *Perceptions of Assistant Principals as Equity-Focused Instructional Leaders*, consisted of 21 items developed using equity-focused instructional leadership behaviors and practices presented in the national BELE framework and Virginia's EdEquityVA framework. The first survey item, the sole item in section one, described the sample based on years of experience as an assistant principal. One of the 65 participants who began the survey did not respond to the first item. Table 5 presents participants' years of experience as assistant principals.

Table 5

Participants' Years of Experience as an Assistant Principal

Years of Experience	Frequency of Responses	Percent of Responses
Less than 1 – 3 years	34	53.12%
4 – 6 years	18	28.12%
7 – 10 years	6	9.38%
11 or more years	6	9.38%

Table 5 indicates that 34 participants have been assistant principals for three years or fewer, making up 53.12% of respondents. Eighteen assistant principals serving for 4-6 years make up 28.12% of the study's participants. Six participants reported serving as assistant principals for 7-10 years, making up 9.38% of the sample. Finally, another six participants reported serving in the role for 11 or more years, making up the final 9.38% of the study's participants.

Subsequent survey items addressed the three research questions in the form of questions about assistant principals' preparation, opportunity, and self-reported professional learning needs

to serve as equity-focused instructional leaders. Survey items 2-23 were divided into three additional sections designed to produce responses that answered the three research questions. Section two asked assistant principals 10 questions about their perceived preparation to develop or support certain equity-focused instructional leadership practices or structures in survey items 2-11. Questions in section two prompted responses that answered the first research question. Section three asked assistant principals 10 questions about their opportunity to engage in or supervise certain equity-focused instructional leadership practices or structures in survey items 12-21. Questions in section three prompted responses that answered the second research question. Finally, section four asked assistant principals two questions about their professional learning interests to serve as equity-focused instructional leaders in survey items 22-23. Questions in section four prompted responses that answered the third research question.

Research Question One

To what extent do assistant principals perceive they are prepared to serve as equity-focused instructional leaders? Survey items in section two were designed to elicit responses that answered the first research question: to what extent do assistant principals perceive they are prepared to serve as equity-focused instructional leaders? Survey items 2-11 asked participants to consider their preparation to develop or support 10 equity-focused instructional practices or structures. The 10 equity-focused instructional leadership practices or structures about which assistant principals were to consider their preparation were adapted from equity-focused instructional leadership behaviors and practices presented in the national BELE framework and the EdEquityVA framework.

Responses to survey items 2-11 were limited to Likert-type scale responses: (1) *unprepared*, (2) *poorly prepared*, (3) *somewhat prepared*, and (4) *very prepared*. Assistant

principals were asked to choose one rating to answer each of the 10 questions in section two.

Table 6 presents quantitative data in percentages, means, and standard deviations of Likert-type scale responses collected from responses to survey items 2-11.

Table 6

Assistant Principals' Preparation to Serve as Equity-Focused Instructional Leaders

Equity-Focused Instructional Leadership Practice	Survey Item	Responses (N)	Unprepared (1)	Poorly Prepared (2)	Somewhat Prepared (3)	Very Prepared (4)	Mean	Standard Deviation (σ)
Prioritize mastery, engagement, academic rigor, and high expectations for all students	2	55	0% (n=0)	1.82% (n=1)	45.45% (n=25)	52.73% (n=29)	3.51	.540
Mitigate enrollment barriers for underrepresented students into accelerated, advanced, and selective academic programs	3	54	5.56% (n=3)	25.93% (n=14)	50% (n=27)	18.52% (n=10)	2.82	.803
Identify, assess, and adapt targeted student supports	4	55	0% (n=0)	5.45% (n=3)	43.64% (n=24)	50.91% (n=28)	3.46	.603
Incentivize equitable assignment of experienced, effective teachers	5	54	9.26% (n=5)	16.67% (n=9)	50% (n=27)	24.07% (n=13)	2.89	.883
Support differentiated and scaled instruction in the classroom	6	55	0% (n=0)	5.45% (n=3)	32.73% (n=18)	61.82% (n=34)	3.56	.601
Assess needs and evaluate resource distribution to enhance opportunities, experiences, and student outcomes	7	55	5.45% (n=3)	23.64% (n=13)	41.82% (n=23)	29.09% (n=16)	2.95	.870
Recruit and retain a diverse teacher population	8	54	12.96% (n=7)	35.19% (n=19)	33.33% (n=18)	18.52% (n=10)	2.57	.944
Support culturally relevant teaching pedagogies to create opportunities for students to explore and relate learning to their personal identities	9	55	5.45% (n=3)	21.82% (n=12)	45.45% (n=25)	27.27% (n=15)	2.95	.848
Prioritize professional learning opportunities that build the individual and collective efficacy of educators and staff	10	55	0% (n=0)	9.09% (n=5)	54.55% (n=30)	36.36% (n=20)	3.27	.622
Evaluate the school's cultural responsiveness and inclusion in the school climate	11	55	1.82% (n=1)	16.36% (n=9)	56.36% (n=31)	25.45% (n=14)	3.06	.705

Of the 10 leadership practices presented in survey items 2-11, assistant principals reported feeling *very prepared* to serve as equity-focused instructional leaders in three areas. Twenty-nine out of 55 respondents, 52.73%, reported feeling *very prepared* to prioritize mastery, engagement, academic rigor, and high expectations for all students in survey item two. Twenty-eight out of 55 respondents, or 50.91%, reported feeling *very prepared* to identify, assess, and adapt targeted student supports in survey item four. In survey item six, 34 out of 55 respondents, 61.82%, reported feeling *very prepared* to support differentiated and scaled instruction in the classroom.

Assistant principals reported feeling *somewhat prepared* to serve as equity-focused instructional leaders in six areas. In survey item three, 27 out of 54 respondents, or 50%, reported feeling *somewhat prepared* to develop or support processes or structures designed to mitigate enrollment barriers for underrepresented students into accelerated, advanced, and selective academic programs. Twenty-seven respondents, or 50%, also reported feeling *somewhat prepared* to incentivize equitable assignment of experienced, effective teachers in survey item five. In survey item seven, 23 out of 55 respondents, 41.82%, reported feeling *somewhat prepared* to assess needs and evaluate resource distribution to enhance opportunities, experiences, and student outcomes. Twenty-five of 55 respondents, 45.45%, reported feeling *somewhat prepared* to support culturally relevant teaching pedagogies to create opportunities for students to explore and relate learning to their personal identities in survey item nine. Thirty of 55 respondents, 54.55%, reported feeling *somewhat prepared* to prioritize professional learning opportunities that build educators' and staff's individual and collective efficacy in survey item 10. In survey item 11, 31 out of 55 respondents, or 56.56%, reported feeling *somewhat prepared* to evaluate the school's cultural responsiveness and inclusion in the school climate.

Over two-thirds of all participants who responded to the survey items in section two reported feeling at least *somewhat prepared* to develop or support nine of the 10 instructional practices or structures equitably. Fifty-four of 55 respondents, 98.18%, indicated feeling *somewhat* or *very prepared* to prioritize mastery, engagement, academic rigor, and high expectations for all students in survey item two. Thirty-seven out of 54 respondents, 68.52%, reported feeling *somewhat* or *very prepared* to mitigate enrollment barriers for underrepresented students into accelerated, advanced, and selective academic programs in survey item three. Fifty-two out of 55 participants, 94.55%, reported being *somewhat* or *very prepared* to identify, assess,

and adapt targeted student supports, and support differentiated and scaled instruction in the classroom in survey item four. In survey item five, 40 out of 54 respondents, 74.07%, reported feeling somewhat prepared or very prepared to incentivize equitable assignment of experienced, effective teachers. In survey item six, 52 out of 55 respondents, 94.55%, indicated feeling somewhat prepared or very prepared to support differentiated and scaled instruction in the classroom. In survey item seven, 39 out of 55 respondents, 70.91%, reported feeling somewhat prepared or very prepared to assess needs and evaluate resource distribution to enhance opportunities, experiences, and student outcomes. In survey item nine, 40 out of 55 respondents, or 72.72%, reported feeling somewhat prepared or very prepared to support culturally relevant teaching pedagogies to create opportunities for students to explore and relate learning to their personal identities. In survey item 10, 50 out of 55 respondents, 90.91%, reported feeling somewhat prepared or very prepared to prioritize professional learning opportunities that build educators' individual and collective efficacy. Finally, in survey item 11, 45 out of 55 respondents, 81.81%, indicated feeling somewhat prepared or very prepared to evaluate the school's cultural responsiveness and inclusion in the school climate.

Assistant principals reported feeling least prepared to recruit and retain a diverse teacher population in survey item eight, with 26 out of 54 respondents, 48.15%, indicating they feel *unprepared* or *poorly prepared* in this area of leadership. Specifically, seven out of 54 respondents, 12.96%, reported feeling *unprepared*, and nineteen out of 54 respondents, 35.19%, reported feeling *poorly prepared*. Additionally, another 18 out of 54 respondents, 33.33%, reported feeling somewhat prepared to recruit and retain a diverse teacher population.

Recruiting and retaining a diverse teacher population yielded the least amount of *very prepared* responses, as did survey item three: mitigating enrollment barriers for underrepresented

students into accelerated, advanced, and selective academic programs. Almost a third of respondents, or 31.49%, reported feeling unprepared or poorly prepared to mitigate enrollment barriers for underrepresented students into accelerated, advanced, and selective academic programs. Additionally, 29.09% of the responses to survey item seven indicate that assistant principals feel completely unprepared or poorly prepared to assess needs and evaluate resource distribution to enhance opportunities, experiences, and student outcomes. In survey item five, 25.93% of the respondents indicated feeling unprepared or poorly prepared to incentivize equitable assignment of experienced, effective teachers. In survey item nine, 27.27% of the respondents indicated feeling unprepared or poorly prepared to support culturally relevant teaching pedagogies.

Survey participants reported no feelings of unpreparedness in four of the 10 equity-focused instructional leadership practices. Zero respondents reported feeling unprepared to prioritize mastery, engagement, academic rigor, and high expectations for all students in survey item two. All 55 respondents reported some level of preparedness in this area, from poorly prepared (1.82%), somewhat prepared (45.45%), and very prepared (52.73%). In survey item four, zero respondents reported feeling unprepared to identify, assess, and adapt targeted student supports. All 55 respondents reported feeling some level of preparedness in this area, from poorly prepared (5.45%), somewhat prepared (43.64%), and very prepared (50.91%). In survey item six, zero respondents reported feeling unprepared to support differentiated and scaled instruction in the classroom. All 55 respondents reported feeling some level of preparedness in this area, from poorly prepared (5.45%), somewhat prepared (32.73%), and very prepared (61.82%). Zero respondents reported feeling unprepared to prioritize professional learning opportunities that build the individual and collective efficacy of educators and staff in survey

item 10. All 55 respondents reported feeling some level of preparedness in this area, from poorly prepared (9.09%), somewhat prepared (54.55%), and very prepared (36.36%).

Research Question Two

To what extent do assistant principals currently practice or supervise equity-focused instructional leadership behaviors or processes? Section three of the survey asked assistant principals 10 questions about their opportunity to participate or engage in the same equity-focused instructional leadership behaviors or practices referenced in survey items 2-11 adapted from equity-focused instructional leadership behaviors and practices presented in the national BELE framework and the EdEquityVA framework. Survey items in section three were designed to elicit responses that answer the second research question: to what extent do assistant principals currently practice or supervise equity-focused instructional leadership behaviors or processes?

Responses to survey items 12-21 were limited to Likert-type scale responses: (1) *never*, (2) *rarely*, (3) *often*, and (4) *always*. Participants were asked to select one rating to answer each of the 10 questions in section three. Table 7 presents quantitative data in percentages, means, and standard deviations of Likert-type scale responses collected from responses to survey items 12-21.

Table 7

Assistant Principals' Opportunity to Service as Equity-Focused Instructional Leaders

Equity-Focused Instructional Leadership Practice	Survey Item	Responses (N)	Never (1)	Rarely (2)	Often (3)	Always (4)	Mean	Standard Deviation (σ)
Prioritize mastery, engagement, academic rigor, and high expectations for all students	12	53	0% (n=0)	13.21% (n=7)	73.58% (n=39)	13.21% (n=7)	3	.519
Mitigate enrollment barriers for underrepresented students into accelerated, advanced, and selective academic programs	13	53	11.32% (n=6)	52.83% (n=28)	30.19% (n=16)	5.66% (n=3)	2.3	.749
Identify, assess, and adapt targeted student supports	14	53	0% (n=0)	15.09% (n=8)	66.04% (n=35)	18.87% (n=10)	3.04	.587
Incentivize equitable assignment of experienced, effective teachers	15	53	22.64% (n=12)	28.3% (n=15)	41.51% (n=22)	7.55% (n=4)	2.34	.919
Support differentiated and scaled instruction in the classroom	16	52	0% (n=0)	23.08% (n=12)	53.85% (n=28)	23.08% (n=12)	3	.686
Assess needs and evaluate resource distribution to enhance opportunities, experiences, and student outcomes	17	53	18.87% (n=10)	30.19% (n=16)	37.74% (n=20)	13.21% (n=7)	2.45	.952
Recruit and retain a diverse teacher population	18	53	30.19% (n=16)	28.3% (n=15)	35.85% (n=19)	5.66% (n=3)	2.17	.935
Support culturally relevant teaching pedagogies to create opportunities for students to explore and relate learning to their personal identities	19	53	3.77% (n=2)	35.85% (n=19)	50.94% (n=27)	9.43% (n=5)	2.66	.706
Prioritize professional learning opportunities that build the individual and collective efficacy of educators and staff	20	53	1.89% (n=1)	18.87% (n=10)	62.26% (n=33)	16.98% (n=9)	2.94	.663
Evaluate the school's cultural responsiveness and inclusion in the school climate	21	53	3.77% (n=2)	35.85% (n=19)	43.4% (n=23)	16.98% (n=9)	2.74	.788

Of the 10 leadership practices presented in survey items 12-21, assistant principals reported that they often engage in nine of the 10 equity-focused instructional leadership practices; the rating *often* was most selected in survey items 12-21. In survey item 12, 39 respondents, 73.58%, reported that they often engage in leadership practices or processes related to prioritizing mastery, engagement, academic rigor, and high expectations for all students. In survey item 14, 35 out of 53 respondents, 66.04%, reported that they often engage in leadership practices or processes related to identifying, assessing, and adapting targeted student supports. In survey item 15, 22 out of 53 respondents, 41.51%, reported that they often engage in leadership practices or processes related to incentivizing equitable assignment of experienced, effective teachers. Twenty-eight out of 52 respondents, 53.85%, indicated that they often engage in leadership practices or processes related to supporting differentiated and scaled instruction in the classroom in survey item 16. Twenty out of 53 respondents, 37.74%, indicated that they often

engage in leadership practices or processes related to assessing needs and evaluating resource distribution to enhance opportunities, experiences, and student outcomes in survey item 17. Nineteen out of 53 respondents, 35.85%, indicated that they often engage in leadership practices or processes related to recruiting and retaining a diverse teacher population in survey item 18. In survey item 19, 50.94% of respondents, 27 out of 53, reported that they often engage in leadership practices or processes related to supporting culturally relevant teaching pedagogies to create opportunities for students to explore and relate learning to their personal identities. In survey item 20, 62.26% of respondents, 33 out of 55, reported that they often engage in leadership practices or processes related to prioritizing professional learning opportunities that build the individual and collective efficacy of educators and staff. Furthermore, in survey item 21, 43.4% of respondents, or 23 out of 53, reported that they often engage in leadership practices or processes related to evaluating the school's cultural responsiveness and inclusion in the school climate.

Four of the 10 equity-focused leadership practices in survey items 12-21 received notably higher ratings of *often* and *always*. These higher ratings indicate that assistant principals often engage in four of the 10 equity-focused leadership practices. Forty-six out of 53 respondents, 86.79%, reported that they often or always engage in leadership practices or processes related to prioritizing mastery, engagement, academic rigor, and high expectations for all students in survey item 12. Forty-five out of 53 respondents, 84.91%, reported that they often or always engage in leadership practices or processes related to identifying, assessing, and adapting targeted student supports in survey item 14. In survey item 20, 62.26% of respondents, 33 out of 55, reported that they often engage in leadership practices or processes related to prioritizing professional learning opportunities that build educators' and staff's individual and collective

efficacy. Lastly, 40 out of 52 respondents, 76.93%, reported that they often or always engage in leadership practices or processes related to supporting differentiated and scaled instruction in the classroom.

Respondents to survey items 12-21 reported having at least some opportunities to engage in seven of the 10 equity-focused instructional leadership practices. Zero respondents indicated that they never engage in leadership practices or processes related to prioritizing mastery, engagement, academic rigor, and high expectations for all students in survey item 12. Zero respondents indicated that they never engage in leadership practices or processes related to identifying, assessing, and adapting targeted student supports. Zero respondents indicated that they never engage in leadership practices or processes related to supporting differentiated and scaled instruction in the classroom.

Assistant principals reported having the fewest opportunities to engage in three of the 10 equity-focused instructional leadership practices. In survey item 13, 34 out of 53 64.15% of respondents reported that they never or rarely engage in leadership practices or processes related to mitigating enrollment barriers for underrepresented students into accelerated, advanced, and selective academic programs. In survey item 18, 31 out of 53 respondents, 58.49%, reported that they never or rarely engage in leadership practices or processes related to recruiting and retaining a diverse teacher population. In survey item 15, 27 out of 53 respondents, 50.94%, reported that they never or rarely engage in leadership practices or processes related to incentivizing equitable assignment of experienced, effective teachers.

Assistant principals most frequently reported never engaging in leadership practices or processes related to three of the 10 equity-focused leadership practices. In survey item 18, 16 out of 53 respondents, 30.19%, reported never engaging in leadership practices or opportunities

related to recruiting and retaining a diverse teacher population. In survey item 15, 12 out of 53 respondents, 22.64%, reported never engaging in leadership practices or opportunities related to incentivizing equitable assignment of experienced, effective teachers. In survey item 17, 10 out of 53 respondents, 18.87%, reported never engaging in leadership practices or opportunities related to assessing needs and evaluating resource distribution to enhance opportunities, experiences, and student outcomes.

Research Question Three

What are assistant principals' self-reported professional learning needs to support or advance their equity-focused instructional leadership in their current or future roles?

Section four asked assistant principals to select three professional learning topics from the 10 equity-focused instructional leadership practices or behaviors referenced in sections two and three of the survey. The final survey item in this section asked assistant principals one open-ended question allowing them to suggest additional equity-focused instructional leadership professional learning topics. Survey items 22 and 23 answered the third research question: what are assistant principals' self-reported professional learning needs to support or advance their equity-focused instructional leadership in their current or future roles? Tables 8 and 9 present quantitative and qualitative data from responses to survey items 22 and 23.

Table 8

Assistant Principals' Professional Learning Needs to Serve Equity-Focused Instructional Leaders

Equity-Focused Instructional Leadership Practice	Responses (<i>n</i>)	Percent of Responses	Percent of Respondents
Culturally relevant teaching	30	19.11%	56.6%
Targeted student supports	20	12.74%	37.7%
School climate	20	12.74%	37.7%
Differentiated and scaled instruction	17	10.83%	32%
Resource distribution	15	9.55%	28.3%
Teacher diversity	14	8.92%	26.4%
Professional learning	14	8.92%	26.4%
Student placement in accelerated programs	10	6.37%	18.9%
Teacher assignment	9	5.73%	17%
Academic rigor	8	5.1%	15.1%

Table 8 presents participants' responses to survey item 22. Survey item 22 asked participants to select three equity-focused instructional leadership practices about which professional learning might benefit them in their current roles as assistant principals or future school leadership roles. Professional learning topics came from the 10 equity-focused instructional leadership practices presented in survey items 2-21.

Fifty-three participants collectively selected a total of 157 professional learning topics. Of the 10 equity-focused instructional leadership topics, participants most frequently selected four. Professional learning related to culturally relevant teaching made up 19.11% of the 157 responses to survey item 22. Respondents equally expressed an interest in two additional professional learning topics. Professional learning related to targeted student supports and school climate made up 12.74% each, or 20 each of the 157 responses. Respondents also expressed an interest in professional learning related to differentiated and scaled instruction, with 17 out of 157 responses, or 10.83%, to benefit them in their current roles as assistant principals or future

educational leadership roles. Conversely, respondents least frequently selected academic rigor as a professional learning topic of interest. Academic rigor made up 5.1% of total responses; it was selected just eight times out of 157 selections.

The final survey item, item 23, asked participants to share ideas about other equity-focused instructional leadership professional learning that might benefit them in their current or future leadership roles. Twenty-five participants submitted responses, giving a total of 33 suggestions. Of the 33 suggested professional learning topics, some were repeated across responses. Table 9 presents participants' 20 unique professional learning topic suggestions.

Table 9

Assistant Principals' Suggested Professional Learning Topics

Equity-Focused Instructional Leadership Topic	Frequency
Family engagement	4
Time and priority management	4
Chronic absenteeism	2
Gender identity	2
Resource distribution	2
Student support	2
Teacher diversity	2
Teacher recruitment and retention	2
Value in equity	2
Behavior interventions and responses	1
Classroom management	1
Conflict management and resolution within academic curricula	1
Culturally relevant teaching	1
Curricula/materials selection	1
Implicit bias	1
Inclusive practices	1
Instructional learning teams	1
Problem-based learning culture	1
Social emotional learning for adults	1
Staff support	1

Family engagement and time and priority management were the most frequently suggested professional learning topics in survey item 23. Complete responses included references to the desired interest in learning how to better support parents and families support their students outside of the classroom and how more effectively include parents on the team of people supporting each student. Assistant principals also reported an interest in learning how to

better manage and prioritize the ever-growing requests of assistant principals with the limited time and opportunity to focus on equity-focused instructional leadership strategies.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to identify assistant principals' preparation, opportunity, and self-reported professional learning needs to serve as equity-focused instructional leaders. Using quantitative research procedures, the researcher identified a sample of assistant principals in Virginia from four school divisions to complete a 23-item researcher-developed survey. The researcher sent survey invitations to 206 assistant principals; data were collected from 65 participants, indicating a response rate of 31.55%. The sample group was primarily composed of assistant principals with little experience. Over half of the respondents, 53.12%, reported serving less than three years in the role.

Survey questions were developed from equity-focused instructional leadership practices and processes presented in the national BELE framework and the EdEquityVA framework. The 23-item survey had four sections. Section one had one question intended to provide the researcher with a description of the sample group. Sections 2-4 asked questions about assistant principals' preparation, opportunity, and professional learning needs to serve as equity-focused instructional leaders to answer three research questions with the same focus.

Respondents to the survey reported feeling most prepared to develop or support programs or processes related to four of the 10 equity-focused instructional leadership practices. Responses to the 23-item survey indicate that assistant principals feel most prepared to develop or support programs and processes related to prioritizing student engagement and academic rigor, targeted student supports, differentiated instruction, and professional learning for staff. Responses to the

survey also indicate that assistant principals most frequently engage in opportunities related to the same four equity-focused instructional leadership practices.

Conversely, respondents reported feeling least prepared to develop or support programs or processes related to five of the 10 equity-focused instructional leadership practices. Responses to the 23-item survey indicate that assistant principals feel least prepared to develop or support programs and processes related to four areas of equity-focused instructional leadership: recruiting and retaining diverse teachers, mitigating enrollment barriers for equitable student placement, appropriately allocating resources, supporting culturally relevant teaching in the classroom, and incentivizing equitable teacher assignment. Responses to the survey also indicate that assistant principals have the fewest opportunities to engage in practices or processes related to the same five equity-focused leadership practices.

Respondents to the survey most frequently indicated an interest in professional learning in six equity-focused instructional leadership topics. Respondents indicated an interest in four of the 10 suggested professional learning topics. Respondents reported interest in professional learning related to culturally relevant teaching, targeted student supports, school climate, and differentiated instruction. Respondents provided suggestions for professional learning topics in the final survey item. Respondents most frequently expressed an interest in family engagement and time and priority management professional learning.

Chapter Five

Findings and Implications

Equity-focused leaders recognize that disparities in student outcomes are often a result of inequities in the learning environment (Carter & Welner, 2013; Grant, 2018; United States Department of Education [DOE], n.d.a). Equity in the learning environment results from aligning students' needs with the skills of staff and school resources (Bridges, 1967; Edmonds, 1979; Grant, 2018; Hallinger & Wang, 2015; Neumerski, 2012). Creating and maintaining a learning environment that meets the needs of all students is a priority for equity-focused instructional leaders (Goldring, Rubin, & Herrmann, 2021; Murphy, 2021; Somoza-Norton & Neumann, 2021). As school leaders, assistant principals can influence if and how equity manifests in the learning environment, thus influencing the overall success of the school and its students (Fleming, 2019; Grant, 2018; Kinard, Pickett, & Shchetynska, 2019; Rubel, 2017; Virginia Department of Education [VDOE], 2020; Zardoya, 2017). As a result, this study aimed to identify assistant principals' preparation, opportunity, and self-reported professional learning needs to serve as equity-focused instructional leaders. The researcher identified three research questions central to this study:

1. To what extent do assistant principals perceive they are prepared to serve as equity-focused instructional leaders?
2. To what extent do assistant principals currently practice or supervise equity-focused instructional leadership behaviors or processes?
3. What are assistant principals' self-reported professional learning needs to support or advance their equity-focused instructional leadership in their current or future roles?

This study utilized a survey research design to collect data from a sample of assistant principals to inform on the three research questions.

Summary of Findings

The study's participants responded to survey questions to indicate their preparation, opportunity, and professional learning needs to engage in 10 specific equity-focused instructional leadership practices or processes related to instruction in the learning environment. The survey's 10 equity-focused instructional leadership practices were adapted from practices presented in the Virginia Department of Education's EdEquityVA framework and the national BELE framework.

The 10 practices were as follows:

1. Prioritizing mastery, engagement, academic rigor, and high expectations for all students,
2. Mitigating enrollment barriers for underrepresented students into accelerated, advanced, and selective academic programs,
3. Identifying, assessing, and adapting targeted student supports,
4. Incentivizing equitable assignment of experienced, effective teachers,
5. Supporting differentiated and scaled instruction in the classroom,
6. Assessing needs and evaluating resource distribution to enhance opportunities, experiences, and student outcomes,
7. Recruiting and retaining a diverse teacher population,
8. Supporting culturally relevant teaching pedagogies to create opportunities for students to explore and relate learning to their personal identities,
9. Prioritizing professional learning opportunities that build the individual and collective efficacy of educators and staff, and

10. Evaluating the school's cultural responsiveness and inclusion in the school climate. Responses to survey items about their preparation and opportunity were limited to ratings on a Likert-type scale. Responses to survey items about their professional learning needs came in the form of a multiple-selection response and one open-ended response.

Finding One

Assistant principals indicated that they are prepared to serve as equity-focused instructional leaders. Survey data presented in Table 6 revealed that over half to nearly all (52-98%) of the assistant principals who participated in the study reported being at least somewhat prepared to engage in all 10 equity-focused instructional leadership practices presented in the survey. A significant majority of assistant principals, over two-thirds (69-98%), indicated feeling at least somewhat prepared to engage in nine of the 10 equity-focused instructional leadership practices, including all practices except recruiting and retaining a diverse teacher population. Assistant principals reported having the lowest sense of preparation to recruit and retain a diverse teacher population. A smaller majority of assistant principals, just 52%, indicated feeling prepared in this area. Specifically, approximately 33% reported feeling somewhat prepared, and about 19% reported feeling very prepared. Just under half, 48%, indicated feeling underprepared. More specifically, approximately 13% reported feeling unprepared, and about 35% reported feeling poorly prepared to recruit and retain a diverse teacher population.

Most assistant principals selected *somewhat prepared* in response to questions about their preparation to engage in six of the 10 equity-focused instructional leadership practices:

- Mitigating enrollment barriers for students,
- Incentivizing equitable teacher assignment,
- Assessing needs and allocating resources,

- Supporting culturally relevant teaching,
- Prioritizing meaningful professional learning, and
- Evaluating the school's climate.

Most assistant principals selected *very prepared* in response to questions about their preparation to engage in three of the 10 equity-focused instructional leadership practices:

- Prioritizing academic rigor and high expectations for students,
- Implementing targeted student supports, and
- Supporting differentiation in the classroom.

This finding confirms what the research suggests: educational leadership programs provide relevant, adequate learning for aspiring assistant principals (NPBEA, 2018; Peters et al., 2016; Young et al., 2017). The NPBEA (2018) reported that effective educational leadership programs align appropriately with the NELP standards.

The NELP standards for building-level leadership preparation address the most critical knowledge and skill areas for beginning building-level educational leaders... [and] specify what novice leaders and preparation program graduates should know and be able to do after completing a high-quality educational leadership preparation program.

(NPBEA, 2018, p. 3)

The fourth NELP standard specifically addresses learning and instruction. The NPBEA (2018) reported that educational leadership programs develop school leaders who understand the expectations and can apply learning and skills to serve as instructional leaders. Furthermore, in their research into the effectiveness of educational leadership programs, Young et al. (2017) found that educational leadership programs appropriately address the NELP standards and sufficiently provide aspiring leaders with the necessary knowledge and skills.

Peters et al. (2016) conducted a study investigating if assistant principals felt sufficiently prepared by their educational leadership programs. Participants in the study reported feeling prepared but also noted that they had continued their learning once in the role. The researchers also suggest that educational leadership programs are most effective when they continually self-assess and evolve just as the world of education evolves (Peters et al., 2016).

Additional research suggests that assistant principals typically continue their learning through on-the-job training and professional learning opportunities while in the role, thus making them better prepared to serve as instructional leaders (Barnett et al., 2017; Gurley et al., 2015; Master et al., 2020). Collaboration between school divisions and educational leadership programs supports focused, standards-based learning for assistant principals (Gurley et al., 2015). Assistant principals also sometimes have mentors and participate in relevant professional development to improve their practice and stay abreast of new practices and approaches to instructional leadership (Barnett et al., 2017; Master et al., 2020). Instructional leaders recognize that student outcomes improve when instructional practice improves (Grissom et al., 2021; Leithwood et al., 2014; Rimmer, 2016). Assistant principals are prepared by their educational leadership programs and continue learning on the job. They know that their leadership of teaching and learning is how they improve instruction and promote equity in the classroom (Grissom et al., 2021).

Finding Two

Assistant principals indicated that they engage in some equity-focused instructional leadership practices. Survey data presented in Table 7 revealed that over half of the assistant principals who participated in this study reported often or always having opportunities to serve as equity-focused instructional leaders in seven of the 10 focus areas:

- Prioritizing academic rigor and high expectations for students,
- Implementing targeted student supports,
- Supporting differentiation in the classroom,
- Assessing needs and allocating resources,
- Supporting culturally relevant teaching,
- Prioritizing meaningful professional learning, and
- Evaluating the school's climate.

More specifically, over two-thirds (77-87%) of the assistant principals who participated in this study reported often or always engaging in four equity-focused leadership practices:

- Prioritizing academic rigor and high student expectations,
- Implementing targeted student supports,
- Supporting differentiation in the classroom, and
- Prioritizing professional learning for teachers and staff.

Over half (51-60%) of the assistant principals reported often or always engaging in three equity-focused leadership practices:

- Assessing needs and allocating resources,
- Supporting culturally relevant teaching pedagogies, and
- Evaluating the school's climate regarding cultural responsiveness and inclusion.

This finding indicates that assistant principals have opportunities to serve as equity-focused instructional leaders. However, research into how assistant principals spend their time is divided. Glanz (1994a) conducted a qualitative study of assistant principals to inquire about their actual responsibilities and the responsibilities they believed they should have. The researcher found that assistant principals performed managerial tasks and were under-involved in staff

development, teacher training, and curriculum development (Glanz, 1994a). Similarly, in another study of assistant principals, Scott (2011) found that they most often spent their time managing student and personnel matters and did not serve as instructional leaders as they expected they would in their role.

Conversely, other research suggests that assistant principals have opportunities to serve as equity-focused instructional leaders and are more than middle managers. School leaders develop people, promote learning, and manage the organization (Grissom et al., 2021; Leithwood et al., 2004). Assistant principals who engage in equity-focused instructional leadership practices strive to create conditions in the learning environment so that the three main priorities function together for the benefit of students (Grissom et al., 2021). Rimmer (2016) suggested that school leaders improve instruction by 1) establishing a vision, mission, and learning-focused culture, 2) improving instructional practices, 3) appropriately allocating resources, and 4) managing systems and processes. Grissom et al. (2021) reported that creating a culture that celebrates diversity, supporting teachers to better connect with all students, developing a robust instructional program, and appropriately allocating personnel and resources are behaviors of an equity-focused leader (Grissom et al., 2021).

Accountability remains a focus in education; therefore, equitable outcomes remain a priority for school leaders (DOE, n.d.a; Grant, 2018; Kinard et al., 2019; NEP, n.d.a; VDOE, 2020). Equity-focused instructional practices are necessary for student achievement (Hofmann, 2021; National Equity Project (NEP), n.d.a; VDOE, 2020; Waterford.org, 2020). In learning environments where educational equity is a strategy for improving student outcomes, instructional leaders, like assistant principals, are key players in the utilization of equity-focused

instructional leadership practices (Fleming, 2019; Grant, 2018; Kinard et al., 2019; Rubel, 2017; VDOE, 2020; Zardoya, 2017).

Finding Three

Assistant principals indicated that they do not regularly participate in equity-focused instructional leadership practices or processes related to allocating resources, incentivizing equitable teacher assignment, maintaining a diverse teacher population, and mitigating enrollment barriers for students. The data presented in Table 7 revealed that almost half to almost two-thirds (49-64%) of the assistant principals who participated in this study reported that they never or rarely engage in behaviors or processes related to four areas of equity-focused instructional leadership:

- Assessing needs and allocating resources,
- Incentivizing equitable teacher assignment,
- Recruiting and retaining diverse teachers, and
- Mitigating enrollment barriers for students.

Although the majority (51%) of assistant principals indicated often or always engaging in opportunities related to equitable resource allocation, a large percentage (49%) indicated that they never or rarely do. A majority, approximately 51%, of the assistant principals indicated that they never or rarely engage in practices or processes related to incentivizing equitable assignment of experienced, effective teachers. About 58% of the assistant principals indicated that they never or rarely engage in practices or processes related to recruiting and retaining a diverse teacher population. Approximately 64% of the assistant principals indicated that they never or rarely engage in practices or processes related to mitigating enrollment barriers for underrepresented students into accelerated, advanced, and selective academic programs.

This finding may indicate that assistant principals view themselves as middle managers. As previously discussed, in an investigation into how they serve their schools, Scott (2011) found that assistant principals more frequently engage in student and personnel matters, not instruction. Militello et al. (2015) also conducted a study of 56 acting assistant principals and found they considered themselves mid-managers, not instructional leaders. They spent time managing operations, logistics, student discipline, and staff supervision (Militello et al., 2015). In these cases, it is sensible that assistant principals who view themselves as managers more frequently behave as such.

Opposing research suggests that assistant principals are satisfied with their ability and opportunity to serve as instructional leaders (Shore & Walshaw, 2016). In a qualitative study to determine how 169 assistant principals see themselves in the role, participants believed they significantly impacted instruction due to their opportunity to serve in this capacity (Shore & Walshaw, 2016). They reported having sufficient opportunities to support and empower staff to improve their teaching practices (Shore & Walshaw, 2016).

Finding Four

Assistant principals expressed an interest in professional learning in three areas of leadership. The survey's data presented in Table 8 revealed that assistant principals expressed interest in participating in professional learning related to one of the 10 suggested equity-focused instructional leadership practices, and they suggested two additional topics in Table 9:

- Supporting culturally relevant teaching,
- Engaging families, and
- Managing time/priorities.

In Table 8, culturally relevant teaching was the most frequently selected equity-focused instructional leadership professional learning topic out of 10 from a majority (57%) of respondents. In Table 9, one participant listed culturally relevant teaching as a topic of interest even after it was presented and selected in the previous survey item, further emphasizing the interest. Family engagement and time/priority management were the most frequently suggested professional learning topics out of 20 suggestions from participants in response to the open-ended survey item.

This finding indicates that assistant principals recognize their shortcomings and can identify growth or interest areas as leaders. According to the research, assistant principals continue learning once placed in the role. Assistant principals expect to engage in new learning through job-related experiences and pre-planned professional development (Barnett et al., 2017; Gurley et al., 2015; Master et al., 2020). Assistant principals continue their learning from mentorships, school-led professional development, and professional development led by outside organizations (Barnett et al., 2017; Master et al., 2020). In a study of assistant principals participating in a two-year development program, Gurley et al. (2015) found that participants benefited from new learning while on the job. The new learning strengthened their knowledge and skills related to instructional leadership, among other facets of school leadership (Gurley et al., 2015). In the study, assistant principals saw value in continued learning from dedicated education professionals (Gurley et al., 2015).

Implications for Practice

Implication One

Educational leadership programs should consider providing aspiring assistant principals with coursework and experiences that further support their development as equity-focused instructional leaders. Finding One of this study indicates that assistant principals are prepared to serve as equity-focused instructional leaders. It is relevant to note that most participants in this study reported having 1-3 years of experience as an assistant principal, as shown in Table 5. The research asserts that aspiring assistant principals participate in standards-based educational leadership programs where they access relevant coursework and build appropriate skills to lead before entering the role (NPBEA, 2018; Peters et al., 2016; Young et al., 2017).

Additionally, when educational leadership programs consistently self-assess and re-evaluate what they offer students, coursework and experiences will progress with students' needs and educational focuses of the time (Peters et al., 2016). Educational leadership programs that partner and collaborate with local or state school divisions to provide focused, standards-based learning also benefit aspiring leaders (Gurley et al., 2015). In this regard, aspiring assistant principals might receive learning specific to a state's standards or vision and mission. In the case of a state adopting an equity framework, as Virginia did with EdEquityVA, students in educational leadership programs have access to relevant learning to strengthen their preparation to lead before entering the role.

Implication Two

Schools and school divisions should continue providing on-the-job training and professional learning for assistant principals to expand their understanding and skills related to equity-focused instructional leadership practices. Finding One of this study indicates that assistant principals are prepared to serve as equity-focused instructional leaders. Table 5 shows that almost half of the assistant principals who participated in this study had 4-11 or more years of experience. The research suggests that assistant principals continue their learning while in the role through informal on-the-job training and formal professional learning (Barnett et al., 2017; Gurley et al., 2015; Master et al., 2020). Each school division in this study shares its vision and mission on its websites. Within these statements, each school division prioritizes professional learning and equity in the learning environment to improve teacher performance and student outcomes. Participants in this study are representative of the efficacy of their school divisions' professional learning plan and communication about their equity priorities. Ongoing, informal, and formal professional learning opportunities strengthen the learner's knowledge and skills in a specific area. According to this study's findings, professional learning processes and the divisions' approach to equity are effective; they should continue in the same manner.

Implication Three

Schools and divisions should continue providing opportunities for assistant principals to practice and utilize their equity-focused instructional leadership skills. Finding Two of this study indicates that assistant principals consistently engage in some equity-focused instructional leadership practices. Survey data presented in Table 7 revealed that over half of the

assistant principals who participated in this study reported often or always having opportunities to serve as equity-focused instructional leaders in seven of the 10 focus areas:

- Prioritizing academic rigor and high expectations for students,
- Implementing targeted student supports,
- Supporting differentiation in the classroom,
- Assessing needs and allocating resources,
- Supporting culturally relevant teaching,
- Prioritizing meaningful professional learning, and
- Evaluating the school's climate.

As the research suggests, assistant principals have many roles and responsibilities in a school, not the least of which is instructional leadership (Glanz, 1994a; Grissom et al., 2021; Leithwood et al., 2004; Rimmer, 2016). Assistant principals taking an active role in effectively improving teaching and learning are committed to approaching that growth through a lens of equity to meet every student's needs. School divisions and principals who allow assistant principals to take the lead in instruction-related aspects of their schools are better able to support students and teachers through informed decision-making. As assistant principals interact more with teachers than division leaders and principals, their involvement in instruction-related aspects of schools should be focused and fit the school's specific needs.

Implication Four

Schools and school divisions should consider providing assistant principals new opportunities to expand their involvement in and leadership of equity-focused instructional practices. Finding Three of this study indicates that assistant principals do not regularly

participate in equity-focused instructional leadership practices or processes related to four of the 10 equity-focused instructional leadership practices:

- Allocating resources,
- Incentivizing equitable teacher assignment,
- Maintaining a diverse teacher population, and
- Mitigating enrollment barriers for students.

Assistant principals are an integral part of a school's leadership. In many ways, assistant principals are extensions of the principal. They should actively participate in selling the school's vision and mission for educational equity and seek diverse teachers who fit the various needs of the school. In their role, they have regular contact with teachers and students and are involved in many aspects of the school's instructional practices. As such, assistant principals have a good pulse on the school's needs. They are suited to know what areas of the school would benefit from new or adjusted resources. Spending time in classrooms allows them to know teachers' strengths and determine where they might be most effective. They also work with teachers to identify appropriate learning paths for their students in the classroom; this work can extend to students' learning paths beyond the classroom, like advanced placement opportunities.

Furthermore, assistant principals also sometimes aspire to become principals. In separate studies on the role of assistant principals, Bigham (2014) and Hoffert (2015) noted that the position is often considered a springboard to the principalship. Giving them access to as many instructional leadership opportunities as possible gives them additional preparation for the principal role should they pursue that leadership position. Principals who practice shared leadership need their assistant principals to be capable and willing to lead.

Implication Five

Educational leadership programs, schools, and divisions should consider providing additional learning opportunities and experiences to further prepare and develop assistant principals as equity-focused instructional leaders. Finding One indicates growth opportunities for assistant principals in all areas of equity-focused instructional leadership presented in this study. The survey's data presented in Table 6 revealed that assistant principals did not express complete confidence in their preparation to serve as equity-focused instructional leaders. Specifically, many participants selected *somewhat prepared* in response to survey items about their preparation. Their responses reveal that they would benefit from additional learning related to seven of the 10 equity-focused instructional leadership practices:

- Mitigating enrollment barriers for students,
- Incentivizing equitable teacher assignment,
- Assessing needs and allocating resources,
- Recruiting and retaining diverse teachers,
- Supporting culturally relevant teaching,
- Prioritizing professional learning, and
- Evaluating the school's climate.

Notably, in Table 8, culturally relevant teaching was the most frequently selected professional learning topic of 10 topics from most participants. In Table 9, one participant suggested the topic again in the final survey item. Educational leadership programs should add or strengthen their current offerings to further develop their students. Although assistant principals reported being *somewhat prepared*, new learning experiences would equip them with knowledge and

skills that would make them more confident in their preparation to lead instruction in their buildings with equity in mind.

Additionally, Finding Four of this study indicates that assistant principals are interested in professional learning in two additional areas of leadership. Assistant principals expressed an interest in learning about family engagement and time/priority management; they were the most frequently suggested professional learning topics out of 20 suggestions in response to the open-ended survey item. Assistant principals committed to equity know that collaboration with families and the larger school community to practice inclusivity and improve cultural competency is vital to the learning environment (Kinard et al., 2019). An interest in improving the approach to family engagement indicates an interest in learning new ways to collaborate with families for the benefit of the students and the school.

In a longitudinal study of assistant principals, Austin (1972) found that assistant principals spent time on tasks no one else would do, had too many tasks, and were still responsible for the school's general success. In another study investigating how assistant principals spend their time, Glanz (1994a) asserted that they spent most of their time on administrative and managerial tasks. In studies by Scott (2011) and Militello et al. (2015), assistant principals reported that their time was also spent on mid-management tasks and logistics and did not spend the time they expected to as instructional leaders. Assistant principals should learn to manage the ever-present administrative and managerial tasks better and focus on equity and instruction in their schools.

Suggestions for Future Studies

Independently, the role of the assistant principal as an instructional leader and the implementation and effects of educational equity are understudied topics. In preparation for this

study, assistant principals in multiple studies reported varying ideas of their role in schools (Cohen & Schechter, 2019; Glanz, 1994a; Grissom et al., 2021; Leithwood et al., 2004; Scott, 2011). Therefore, future studies should further investigate the practice of assistant principals as instructional leaders. More research is needed to know what they and other stakeholders believe their role in instruction should be and if they believe it to be, or could be, impactful.

Because the principal determines to what extent leadership and decision-making are shared, assistant principals will continue to have varied experiences (Cohen & Schechter, 2019). Investigations into how principals view and utilize their assistant principals would provide insight into the practice and potential impact of assistant principals on the learning environment, teacher performance, and student outcomes. According to the research, assistant principals influence the learning environment and students' potential for success (Goldring et al., 2021; Murphy, 2021; Somoza-Norton & Neumann, 2021). Future studies should investigate this balance in schools or divisions that have seen tremendous growth in student outcomes and those that have remained stagnant. There may be value in learning if and how the assistant principal contributes to that growth, stagnation, or decline.

Consistent, albethey varying year to year, inequities in student outcomes across states, divisions, and schools indicate a need to do things differently. If equity is, in fact, the way, studies into how schools, divisions, and states with a proven commitment to equity have integrated equity into how they support teachers, teach students, and manage the organization would be enlightening. Teachers and leaders need specific examples of how to assess what they are currently doing and how they can shift to a focus on equity for the benefit of all students. Future studies should include investigations into who has successfully shifted to a lens of educational equity and how they did it.

Summary

School leaders who are committed to the school's success prioritize aligning the needs of their students with the skills of their staff and the school's resources; this alignment contributes to the school's success (Bridges, 1967; Edmonds, 1979; Grant, 2018; Hallinger & Wang, 2015; Neumerski, 2012). Instructional leaders who prioritize equity recognize that disparities in student outcomes result from inequities in students' educational experiences (Carter & Welner, 2013; Grant, 2018; United States Department of Education [DOE], n.d.a). Instructional leaders are critical to if and how teachers consider and meet every student's needs. (Goldring, Rubin, & Herrmann, 2021; Murphy, 2021; Somoza-Norton & Neumann, 2021). Their preparation and opportunity dictate how assistant principals influence equitable educational experiences and student outcomes (Fleming, 2019; Grant, 2018; Kinard, Pickett, & Shchetynska, 2019; Rubel, 2017; Virginia Department of Education [VDOE], 2020; Zardoya, 2017).

The purpose of this study was to identify assistant principals' preparation, opportunity, and self-reported professional learning needs to serve as equity-focused instructional leaders. For this quantitative study, the researcher identified a sample of assistant principals in Virginia to complete a survey that would answer three research questions:

1. To what extent do assistant principals perceive they are prepared to serve as equity-focused instructional leaders?
2. To what extent do assistant principals currently practice or supervise equity-focused instructional leadership behaviors or processes?
3. What are assistant principals' self-reported professional learning needs to support or advance their equity-focused instructional leadership in their current or future roles?

This study's significant findings indicate that assistant principals are prepared to serve as equity-focused instructional leaders. They often play a role in decisions that impact student placement and support, classroom instruction and professional learning, and evaluating the school's climate and resources. However, assistant principals do not make critical decisions about equitable student placement, hiring and assigning teachers that meet students' needs, and allocating resources. They also express interest in continued professional learning to improve their practice as equity-focused instructional leaders. The findings have implications for how educational leadership programs and school divisions support aspiring and active assistant principals. Principals and school divisions should also consider the responsibilities they assign to assistant principals and allow them to play a more active, consistent role in securing equity in instructional practices and decisions in the learning environment.

Personal Reflections

This research was an attempt to gain insight into the value assistant principals add, or could add, to schools when empowered to make critical leadership decisions alongside the principal. Through this process, it became clear that it might be challenging to quantify that value, but we *can* qualify it. Assistant principals bring academic and professional experience with them into a role that can significantly impact schools. Additional conversations about leading and serving schools with equity would strengthen assistant principals' work and benefit all stakeholders.

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Appendix A

Institutional Board Review (IRB) Permission to Conduct Study



Division of Scholarly Integrity and
Research Compliance
Institutional Review Board
North End Center, Suite 4120 (MC 0497)
300 Turner Street NW
Blacksburg, Virginia 24061
540/231-3732
ib@ut.edu
<http://www.research.ut.edu/IRB/app>

MEMORANDUM

DATE: July 28, 2022
TO: Jodie Lynn Brinkmann, Carmen Waterford
FROM: Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (FWA00000572)
PROTOCOL TITLE: Perceptions of Assistant Principals as Equity-Focused Instructional Leaders
IRB NUMBER: 22-342

Effective July 28, 2022, the Virginia Tech Human Research Protection Program (HRPP) determined that this protocol meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review under 45 CFR 46.104(d) category (ies) 2(f).

Ongoing IRB review and approval by this organization is not required. This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these activities impact the exempt determination, please submit an amendment to the HRPP for a determination.

This exempt determination does not apply to any collaborating institution(s). The Virginia Tech HRPP and IRB cannot provide an exemption that overrides the jurisdiction of a local IRB or other institutional mechanism for determining exemptions.

All investigators (listed above) are required to comply with the researcher requirements outlined at:

<https://secure.research.vt.edu/external/irb/responsibilities.htm>

(Please review responsibilities before beginning your research.)

PROTOCOL INFORMATION:

Determined As: **Exempt, under 45 CFR 46.104(d) category(ies) 2(f)**
 Protocol Determination Date: **July 28, 2022**

ASSOCIATED FUNDING:

The table on the following page indicates whether grant proposals are related to this protocol, and which of the listed proposals, if any, have been compared to this protocol, if required.

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An equal opportunity, affirmative action institution

SPECIAL INSTRUCTIONS:

***Please note: The HRPP office has stopped stamping documents for Exempt protocols. It is your responsibility to maintain these documents and make current versions available on request.

Please obtain required permissions from the Departments/Offices of Research and Evaluation from the applicable school divisions in Virginia prior to conducting any human subjects research activities with this population.

Date*	OSP Number	Sponsor	Grant Comparison Conducted?

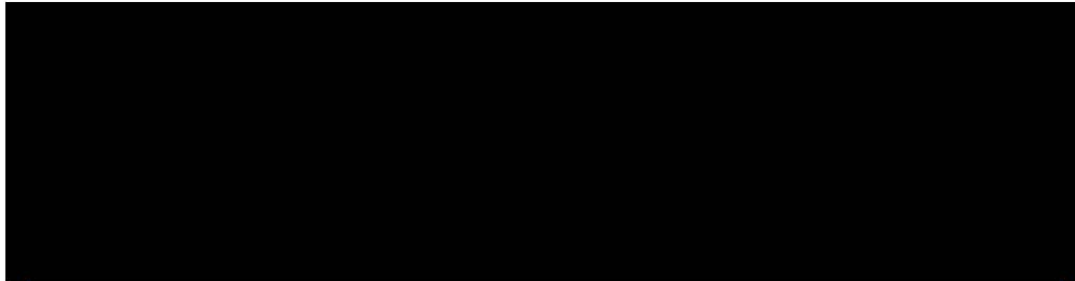
* Date this proposal number was compared, assessed as not requiring comparison, or comparison information was revised.

If this protocol is to cover any other grant proposals, please contact the HRPP office (irb@vt.edu) immediately.

Appendix B

Approval from School Divisions to Conduct Study

School Division A



August 23, 2022

Carmen Waterford
 Doctoral Candidate, Virginia Tech

Dear Ms. Waterford:

Your request to conduct research for your doctoral degree at Virginia Tech is approved. Specifically, you are approved to conduct your research – *Perceptions of Assistant Principals as Equity-Focused Instructional Leaders*. The approval is granted with the understanding that the following conditions will apply:

- Participation of school personnel is strictly voluntary. Approval to contact specific groups does not guarantee participation.
- Names of individuals, schools, or the name of the school district cannot be used in the reporting of your data or your findings without prior permission from the Department of [REDACTED].
- All copies, distribution, retrieval of materials, and arrangement of interviews/data collections will be your responsibility. An Excel file with assistant principals email addresses is provided by [REDACTED].
- Questions/procedures must be limited to those detailed in your proposal and submitted to [REDACTED] in your request to conduct research application.

You may use this letter as a cover letter when contacting assistant principals in [REDACTED]. Should you have further questions, feel free to contact me at [REDACTED]. Best wishes with your research study and continued pursuit of your educational goals.

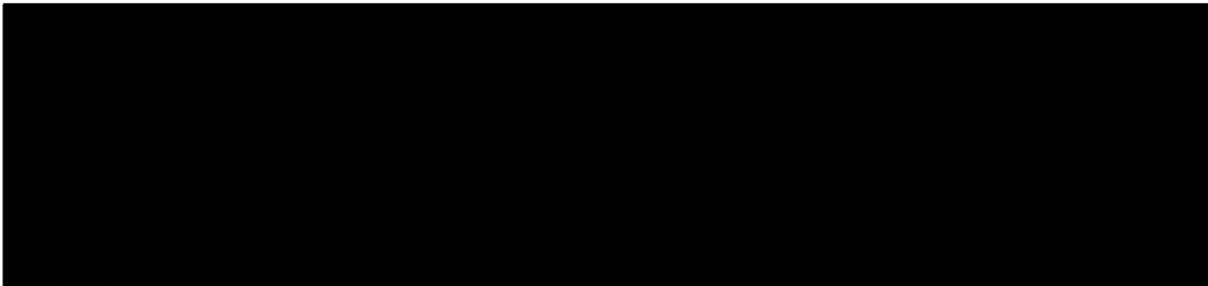
Sincerely,

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]
 [REDACTED]
 [REDACTED]

Attachment: Assistant Principal Emails_8.22.22

School Division B



September 13, 2022

Carmen Waterford



Dear Ms. Waterford,

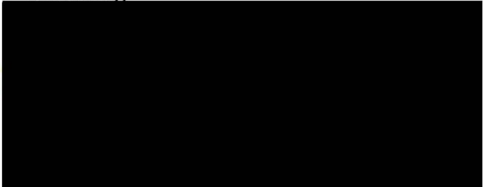
Thank you for your request to conduct research in [REDACTED]. The Research Committee has granted approval of your proposal on "Perceptions of Assistant Principals as Equity-Focused Instructional Leaders". We are in receipt of all required documentation. You may now proceed with your project as outlined in your application/proposal.

Please be aware that the identification of [REDACTED], as a division, or any schools, programs, employees or students of [REDACTED] are prohibited in published research without express written consent.

Also be advised that your approval will expire on December 31, 2022. If you are unable to complete your research within this time frame, please contact me. An extension will need to be requested and granted by the Research Committee in order to proceed with the research.

It is our expectation to receive a copy of your findings once the research has been completed. We wish you success in your research.

Sincerely,



School Division C



Carmen Waterford <crmnrw@vt.edu>

RE: Research Request

1 message

[Redacted]
To: Carmen Waterford <crmnrw@vt.edu>

Wed, Aug 31, 2022 at 9:55 AM

I am please to let you know that your research has been approved. Please let me know before you send your survey out so that I can let principals know to expect it and that is has been approved.

Good luck with your research!

[Redacted]
[Redacted]
[Redacted]
[Redacted]
[Redacted]
[Redacted]
[Redacted]

From: Carmen Waterford <crmnrw@vt.edu>
Sent: Tuesday, August 23, 2022 4:01 PM
To: [Redacted]
Subject: Research Request

[Redacted]:
[Redacted] and a doctoral candidate at Virginia Tech conducting research for my dissertation. I believe my research topic aligns with the current vision and goals of [Redacted], and I would like to include [Redacted] in my investigation. I have reviewed [Redacted] provided by the School Board. My proposed research plan is enclosed as well as the necessary supplemental documents. Please let me know if additional information is required to process my application.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Carmen Waterford, M.A.Ed.
Doctoral Candidate
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

School Division D



September 7, 2022

Ms. Carmen R Waterford
crnwr@vt.edu

Dear Ms. Waterford,

I am pleased to inform you that your request to conduct the study entitled "*Perceptions of Assistant Principals as Equity-Focused Instructional Leaders*" be given conditional approval. This study should be conducted on a voluntary basis only, and administered to assistant principals who are willing to participate. You will be responsible for making contact with principals.

A copy of the results of your interview must be forwarded to the [redacted] upon completion.

Best wishes for continued success.

Sincerely,

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

Appendix C

Participant Recruitment E-mail

TO: [Assistant Principals' E-mail Addresses or Group Contact]

SUBJECT: Assistant Principals Study Invitation

Dear Assistant Principal,

You are invited to participate in an anonymous research study investigating assistant principals' preparation, opportunities, and self-reported professional learning needs to serve as equity-focused instructional leaders. Assistant, associate, and vice principals are invited to participate.

If you agree to participate in this study, please complete the anonymous survey. The survey may take approximately 10-20 minutes to complete. Survey responses are confidential. No school, participant names, or other identifying information will be collected in the survey. There are no anticipated risks or benefits to participating in this study. Your choice not to participate in this study will not harm your status with your school division.

This survey will close at the end of the day on [insert date].

Click the link to begin the survey:

<https://virginiatech.questionpro.com/APsEFILvt>

Thank you for your time.

Carmen Waterford
Doctor of Education Candidate
School of Education
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

Appendix D

Assistant Principals as Equity-Focused Instructional Leaders Survey

1. How many years of experience do you have as an assistant (or associate or vice) principal in Virginia?

1. Less than 1 - 3 years
2. 4 - 6 years
3. 7 - 10 years
4. 11 or more years

2. How prepared do you feel to develop or support programs and structures that prioritize mastery, engagement, and ensure academic rigor and high expectations for all students?

1. Unprepared
2. Poorly Prepared
3. Somewhat Prepared
4. Very Prepared

3. How prepared do you feel to develop or support programs and structures that help mitigate enrollment barriers for underrepresented students into accelerated, advanced, and selective academic programs?

1. Unprepared
2. Poorly Prepared
3. Somewhat Prepared
4. Very Prepared

4. How prepared do you feel to develop or support programs and structures that involve identifying, assessing, and adapting targeted supports for students?

1. Unprepared
2. Poorly Prepared
3. Somewhat Prepared
4. Very Prepared

5. How prepared do you feel to develop or support programs and structures that incentivize equitable assignment of experienced, effective teachers?

1. Unprepared
2. Poorly Prepared
3. Somewhat Prepared
4. Very Prepared

6. How prepared do you feel to develop or support programs and structures that support differentiated and scaled instruction in the classroom?

1. Unprepared
2. Poorly Prepared
3. Somewhat Prepared
4. Very Prepared

7. How prepared do you feel to engage in processes that assess needs and evaluate resource distribution for the purpose of enhancing opportunities, experiences, and outcomes for students?

1. Unprepared
2. Poorly Prepared
3. Somewhat Prepared
4. Very Prepared

8. How prepared do you feel to develop or support programs and structures designed to recruit and retain a diverse teacher population?

1. Unprepared
2. Poorly Prepared
3. Somewhat Prepared
4. Very Prepared

9. How prepared do you feel to develop or support programs and structures that support culturally relevant teaching pedagogies in order to create opportunities for students to explore and relate learning to their personal identities?

1. Unprepared
2. Poorly Prepared
3. Somewhat Prepared
4. Very Prepared

10. How prepared do you feel to develop or support programs and structures that prioritize professional learning opportunities that build the individual and collective efficacy of educators and staff?

1. Unprepared
2. Poorly Prepared
3. Somewhat Prepared
4. Very Prepared

11. How prepared do you feel to develop or support programs and structures that evaluate the school's cultural responsiveness and inclusion in the school climate?

1. Unprepared
2. Poorly Prepared
3. Somewhat Prepared
4. Very Prepared

12. How frequently do you participate in developing or supporting programs and structures that prioritize mastery, engagement, and ensure academic rigor and high expectations for all students?

1. Never
2. Rarely
3. Often
4. Always

13. How frequently do you participate in developing or supporting programs and structures that help mitigate enrollment barriers for underrepresented students into accelerated, advanced, and selective academic programs?

1. Never
2. Rarely
3. Often
4. Always

14. How frequently do you participate in developing or supporting programs and structures that involve identifying, assessing, and adapting targeted supports for students?

1. Never
2. Rarely
3. Often
4. Always

15. How frequently do you participate in developing or supporting programs and structures that incentivize equitable assignment of experienced, effective teachers?

1. Never
2. Rarely
3. Often
4. Always

16. How frequently do you participate in developing or supporting programs and structures that support differentiated and scaled instruction in the classroom?

1. Never
2. Rarely
3. Often
4. Always

17. How frequently do you participate in developing or supporting programs and structures that assess needs and evaluate resource distribution for the purpose of enhancing opportunities, experiences, and outcomes for students?

1. Never
2. Rarely
3. Often
4. Always

18. How frequently do you participate in developing or supporting programs and structures designed to recruit and retain a diverse teacher population?

1. Never
2. Rarely
3. Often
4. Always

19. How frequently do you participate in developing or supporting programs and structures that support culturally relevant teaching pedagogies in order to create opportunities for students to explore and relate learning to their personal identities?

1. Never
2. Rarely
3. Often
4. Always

20. How frequently do you participate in developing or supporting programs and structures that prioritize professional learning opportunities that build the individual and collective efficacy of educators and staff?

1. Never
2. Rarely
3. Often
4. Always

21. How frequently do you participate in developing or supporting programs and structures that evaluate the school's cultural responsiveness and inclusion in the school climate?

1. Never
2. Rarely
3. Often
4. Always

22. Please choose the three (3) equity-focused instructional leadership practices about which professional learning might be most beneficial to you in your current role or future school leadership roles?

1. Academic Rigor
2. Student Placement in Accelerated Academic Programs
3. Targeted Student Supports
4. Teacher Assignment
5. Differentiated and Scaled Instruction
6. Resource Distribution
7. Teacher Diversity
8. Culturally Relevant Teaching
9. Professional Learning
10. School Climate

23. What other equity-focused instructional leadership professional learning might be most beneficial to you in your current role or future school leadership roles? (Open-ended)

Appendix E

Perceptions of Assistant Principals as Equity-Focused Instructional Leaders Survey Items and Research Questions Alignment Matrix

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to identify assistant principals' preparation, opportunity, and self-reported professional learning needs to serve as equity-focused instructional leaders.

Research Questions

1. To what extent do assistant principals perceive they are prepared to serve as equity-focused instructional leaders?
2. To what extent do assistant principals currently practice or supervise equity-focused instructional leadership behaviors or processes?
3. What are assistant principals' self-reported professional learning needs to support or advance their equity-focused instructional leadership in their current or future roles?

Research Question(s)	Survey Item(s)
Demographics	1. How many years of experience do you have as an assistant principal in Virginia? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Less than 1 – 3 years 2. 4 – 6 years 3. 7 – 10 years 4. 11 or more years
1. To what extent do assistant principals perceive they are prepared to serve as equity-focused instructional leaders?	<i>Response Options: (1) Unprepared, (2) Poorly Prepared, (3) Somewhat Prepared, (4) Very Prepared</i> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. How prepared do you feel to develop or support programs and structures that prioritize mastery, engagement, and ensure academic rigor and high expectations for all students? 3. How prepared do you feel to develop or support programs and structures that help mitigate enrollment barriers for

underrepresented students into accelerated, advanced, and selective academic programs?

4. How prepared do you feel to develop or support programs and structures that involve identifying, assessing, and adapting targeted supports for students?

5. How prepared do you feel to develop or support programs and structures that incentivize equitable assignment of experienced, effective teachers?

6. How prepared do you feel to develop or support programs and structures that support differentiated and scaled instruction in the classroom?

7. How prepared do you feel to engage in processes that assess needs and evaluate resource distribution for the purpose of enhancing opportunities, experiences, and outcomes for students?

8. How prepared do you feel to develop or support programs and structures designed to recruit and retain a diverse teacher population?

9. How prepared do you feel to develop or support programs and structures that support culturally relevant teaching pedagogies in order to create opportunities for students to explore and relate learning to their personal identities?

10. How prepared do you feel to develop or support programs and structures that prioritize professional learning opportunities that build the individual and collective efficacy of educators and staff?

11. How prepared do you feel to develop or support programs and structures that evaluate the school's cultural responsiveness and inclusion in the school climate?

<p>2. To what extent do assistant principals currently practice or supervise equity-focused instructional leadership behaviors or processes?</p>	<p><i>Response Options: (1) Never, (2) Rarely, (3) Often, (4) Always</i></p> <p>12. How frequently do you participate in developing or supporting programs and structures that prioritize mastery, engagement, and ensure academic rigor and high expectations for all students?</p> <p>13. How frequently do you participate in developing or supporting programs and structures that help mitigate enrollment barriers for underrepresented students into accelerated, advanced, and selective academic programs?</p> <p>14. How frequently do you participate in developing or supporting programs and structures that involve identifying, assessing, and adapting targeted supports for students?</p> <p>15. How frequently do you participate in developing or supporting programs and structures that incentivize equitable assignment of experienced, effective teachers?</p> <p>16. How frequently do you participate in developing or supporting programs and structures that support differentiated and scaled instruction in the classroom?</p> <p>17. How frequently do you participate in developing or supporting programs and structures that assess needs and evaluate resource distribution for the purpose of enhancing opportunities, experiences, and outcomes for students?</p> <p>18. How frequently do you participate in developing or supporting programs and structures designed to recruit and retain a diverse teacher population?</p> <p>19. How frequently do you participate in developing or supporting programs and</p>
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	<p>structures that support culturally relevant teaching pedagogies in order to create opportunities for students to explore and relate learning to their personal identities?</p> <p>20. How frequently do you participate in developing or supporting programs and structures that prioritize professional learning opportunities that build the individual and collective efficacy of educators and staff?</p> <p>21. How frequently do you participate in developing or supporting programs and structures that evaluate the school's cultural responsiveness and inclusion in the school climate?</p>
<p>3. What are assistant principals' self-reported professional learning needs to support or advance their equity-focused instructional leadership in their current or future roles?</p>	<p>22. Please choose the three (3) equity-focused instructional leadership practices about which professional learning might be most beneficial to you in your current role or future school leadership roles.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Academic Rigor 2. Student Placement in Accelerated Academic Programs 3. Targeted Student Supports 4. Teacher Assignment 5. Differentiated and Scaled Instruction 6. Resource Distribution 7. Teacher Diversity 8. Culturally Relevant Teaching 9. Professional Learning 10. School Climate <p>23. What other equity-focused instructional leadership professional learning might be most beneficial to you in your current role or future school leadership roles? (Open-ended)</p>

Appendix F

Certificate of Completion of the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI)

Program

		Completion Date 26-Sep-2020 Expiration Date 26-Sep-2023 Record ID 38633504
This is to certify that:		
<p>Carmen Waterford</p>		
Has completed the following CITI Program course:		
<p>Social & Behavioral Research (Curriculum Group) Social & Behavioral Research (Course Learner Group) 1 - Basic Course (Stage)</p>		
<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;"> <p>Not valid for renewal of certification through CME. Do not use for TransCelerate mutual recognition (see Completion Report).</p> </div>		
Under requirements set by:		
<p>Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University (Virginia Tech)</p>		
		 Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative
Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify/?w361cdf6e-e5b9-42fb-b3b8-379179dc6a51-38633504		

Appendix G

Implied Consent Agreement

Research Title: Perceptions of Assistant Principals as Equity-Focused Instructional Leaders

Researcher: Carmen R. Waterford

Contact E-mail: crmnrw@vt.edu

IRB# 22-342

Purpose of the study: The purpose of this study is to identify assistant principals' preparation, opportunities, and self-reported professional learning needs to serve as equity-focused instructional leaders.

Participation in the study: The survey will take approximately 20 minutes to complete. All survey responses will be collected electronically using the QuestionPro survey platform available through Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

Anticipated Risks: There are no anticipated risks to persons who participate in the study.

Time Period: The survey will take approximately 20 minutes to complete.

Benefits: There are no direct benefits to participants in this study.

Confidentiality: All information collected in this survey will be handled with strict confidentiality. The data generated from the survey and that which will be included in the dissertation will contain no identifying information regarding the participants, the participants' school, or the school division. The survey results will only be available to the researcher and dissertation committee chair. The data collected in the survey will be held for approximately one year following the defense of this dissertation. During this year, the results will only be accessible to the researcher.

Participation: Your participation in this study is anonymous and voluntary.

Compensation: Participants will not be compensated for their participation in this study.

Right to withdraw from the study: You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Your survey responses will be deleted and destroyed at the time of withdrawal. The data will not be included in the final dissertation.

Process for withdrawal from the study: If you wish to withdraw from this study, please notify the researcher either by phone or via e-mail using the contact information provided in this Implied Consent Agreement.

Questions or Concerns: At any point, if you have any questions or concerns about this study, please contact the dissertation committee chair at the contact information listed below. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or concerns or complaints about the research, you may contact the Virginia Tech HRPP at irb@vt.edu or 540-231-3732

Dissertation Committee Chair:

Dr. Jodie L. Brinkmann

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

Richmond Center 2810 Parham Rd, Suite 300

Richmond, VA 23294

Telephone: 804-662-7288

E-mail: sammy1@vt.edu

Participation Agreement: Consent is implied by completing and submitting the survey.