

# BUILDING LEADERSHIP CAPACITY IN ASPIRING SCHOOL ASSISTANT PRINCIPALS

by

LAUREN PELLIS

(Under the Direction of Karen Bryant)

## ABSTRACT

This dissertation advocates for improved succession planning in educational leadership, particularly in the public sector, where it often receives insufficient attention. It proposes a robust leadership pipeline program within school districts to enhance the capacity of aspiring assistant principals by providing hands-on experiences, mentorship opportunities, and tailored professional development initiatives. Emphasizing crucial competencies like communication, conflict resolution, and collaboration, the program also includes formal pathways for career advancement and a culture of reflection. Ongoing evaluation mechanisms ensure effectiveness, ultimately contributing to a stronger leadership bench and improved educational quality for all students.

INDEX WORDS: Aspiring school leaders, Assistant principals, Building capacity, Leadership pipeline

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LAUREN PELLIS

B.A., The College of Saint Rose, 2010

M.S., The College of Saint Rose, 2011

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Lauren Pells

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LAUREN PELLIS

Major Professor: Karen Bryant  
Committee: Jami Berry  
Kaneshia Dorsan

Electronic Version Approved:

Ron Walcott  
Dean of the Graduate School  
The University of Georgia  
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## DEDICATION

To my dad, Paul,

In the quiet of my memories, you still shine bright, lighting up my life with your inspiration. Navigating through the twists and turns of academia, your presence, though physically absent, fills the void, pushing me onward. Even as you left this world during the hustle of my degree, your spirit stayed with me, nudging me forward at every turn.

Your love, wisdom, and encouragement were the core of my education. Every lesson learned, and every victory celebrated bears the mark of your influence. Your faith in me knew no bounds, driving me towards greatness, even now that you're gone.

I think of the sacrifices you made for my success as I write these words. Your dedication was limitless, your devotion unwavering. Though you're not by my side in person, your legacy lives on in every achievement.

Dad, you were my pillar of strength, my confidant, my guiding star. Though you are no longer here, your spirit still lights my way through the darkest of nights. This dissertation is my tribute to you, a testament to your belief in me, and a celebration of your profound impact on my life.

Love,

Laur

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|   | Page |
|---|------|
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS  | v    |
| LIST OF TABLES  | x    |
| LIST OF FIGURES   | xi   |
| CHAPTER   |      |
| 1 INTRODUCTION  | 1    |
| The Problem   | 4    |
| Statement of Purpose  | 5    |
| Research Questions  | 5    |
| Definition of Terms   | 6    |
| Theoretical Framework                                       | 7    |
| Logic Model   | 8    |
| Overview of the Methodology                                 | 10   |
| Interventions   | 11   |
| Significance of the Study                                   | 12   |
| Organization of the Dissertation                            | 12   |
| 2 REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE                          | 13   |
| Aspiring Leadership Programs                                | 14   |
| Effective Leadership in High-Needs Schools                  | 19   |
| Social Justice Leadership and its Effects on School Climate | 26   |

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| Planning and Assessment                     | 32        |
| Organizational and Operational Management   | 37        |
| Communication and Community Relations       | 40        |
| Chapter Summary                             | 46        |
| <b>3 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY</b>    | <b>48</b> |
| Rationale for Qualitative Research Design   | 49        |
| Overview of Action Research Methods         | 50        |
| Action Research Design                      | 51        |
| Logic Model                                 | 52        |
| Action Research Design Team                 | 54        |
| Action Research Implementation Team         | 56        |
| Action Research Plan and Timeline           | 57        |
| Context of the Study                        | 58        |
| Data Sources                                | 64        |
| Participants and Selection Criteria         | 65        |
| Data Collection Methods                     | 66        |
| Interventions                               | 72        |
| Data Analysis Methods                       | 73        |
| Reliability, Validity, and Generalizability | 77        |
| Subjectivity Statement                      | 78        |
| Limitations                                 | 79        |
| Chapter Summary                             | 79        |

|   |  |     |
|---|--|-----|
| 4 | FINDINGS FROM THE RESEARCH CASE                        | 80  |
|   | Context of the Study                                   | 80  |
|   | Action Research Implementation Team                    | 85  |
|   | Action Research Design Team                            | 86  |
|   | Findings from the Case                                 | 87  |
|   | Action Research Cycle 1                                | 88  |
|   | Action Research Cycle 2                                | 94  |
|   | Action Research Cycle 3                                | 104 |
|   | Chapter Summary  | 110 |
| 5 | ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS FROM THE ACTION RESEARCH CASE     | 111 |
|   | Thematic Analysis                                      | 112 |
|   | Research Question 1                                    | 114 |
|   | Research Question 2                                    | 119 |
|   | Research Question 3                                    | 123 |
|   | Chapter Summary  | 125 |
| 6 | CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, & CONNECTIONS TO LEADERSHIP | 127 |
|   | Summary of the Study                                   | 127 |
|   | Discussion of the Findings                             | 131 |
|   | Implications for School & District Leaders             | 136 |
|   | Implications for Policy                                | 138 |
|   | Implications for Further Research                      | 139 |
|   | Chapter Summary and Final Thoughts                     | 140 |
|   | REFERENCES   | 143 |

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| APPENDICES  | 158 |
| A Empirical Findings Table                                      | 158 |
| B Figure B1: <i>LAPS Reference Sheet with Sample Indicators</i> | 162 |
| C Participant Application Questions                             | 163 |
| D Interview Protocols   | 164 |

## LIST OF TABLES

|   | Page |
|---|------|
| Table 3.1: <i>Action Research Design Team Members</i>                                     | 55   |
| Table 3.2: <i>Action Research Implementation Team Members</i>                             | 56   |
| Table 3.3: <i>Action Research Timeline</i>  | 57   |
| Table 3.4: <i>Initial Interview Questions Aligned to Research Questions</i>               | 67   |
| Table 3.5: <i>Final Interview Questions Aligned to Research Questions</i>                 | 68   |
| Table 3.6: <i>Focus Group Questions Aligned to Research Questions</i>                     | 69   |
| Table 3.7: <i>Sample Observation Notes from Intervention 2</i>                            | 71   |
| Table 3.8: <i>Excerpts from the Researcher's Journal from Action Research Cycle 3</i>     | 72   |
| Table 3.9: <i>Interventions per Action Research Cycle</i>                                 | 73   |
| Table 3.10: <i>Code Sampling for Data</i>   | 75   |
| Table 3.11: <i>Phases of Thematic Analysis and Establishing Trustworthiness</i>           | 76   |
| Table 3.12: <i>Triangulation of Research Methods</i>                                      | 78   |
| Table 4.1: <i>Action Research Implementation Team Members' Certifications</i>             | 85   |
| Table 4.2: <i>Action Research Design Team Members' Certifications &amp; Degree Levels</i> | 87   |
| Table 5.1: <i>Frequency of Themes Connected to Research Questions</i>                     | 112  |

## LIST OF FIGURES

|   | Page |
|---|------|
| Figure 1.1: <i>Leadership Development and Succession Planning Framework</i>                 | 8    |
| Figure 1.2: <i>Continuous Improvement Cycle</i>   | 9    |
| Figure 3.1: <i>The Action Research Process</i>  | 51   |
| Figure 3.2: <i>The Spiraling Nature of Action Research</i>                                  | 52   |
| Figure 3.3: <i>Logic Model</i>  | 53   |
| Figure 3.4: <i>Percentage of Students Receiving Free or Reduced Lunch</i>                   | 59   |
| Figure 3.5: <i>Demographics of the Southern Magnolia Cluster</i>                            | 60   |
| Figure 3.6: <i>Percentage of English Language Learners in the Southern Magnolia Cluster</i> | 61   |
| Figure 3.7: <i>Teachers' Gender Percentages</i>   | 63   |
| Figure 3.8: <i>Teachers' Racial and Ethnic Percentages</i>                                  | 63   |
| Figure 3.9: <i>Degrees in Education Held by Teachers</i>                                    | 64   |
| Figure 3.10: <i>Teachers' Years of Experience in the Classroom</i>                          | 64   |

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The development of aspiring leadership programs holds the potential to enhance the preparation of teachers and staff interested in attaining school and district leadership positions in educational settings (Palmer et al., 2019). The formulation of principal pipeline programs has helped bridge the gap between theory and practice seen in former aspiring leaders' programs (Gates et al., 2020; Service et al., 2016; Taylor Backor & Gordon, 2015; Thessin & Clayton, 2013). Principal, assistant principal, or educational leader pipeline programs exist to prepare teachers and staff interested in acquiring leadership positions for the next level (Turnbull et al., 2013a). Many of these pipeline programs go beyond an aspiring leadership program, focusing on leader standards and preservice preparation and move to selective hiring and placement, on-the-job support and evaluation, principal supervision, and leader tracking systems and systems of support (Gates et al., 2020; McManus, 2017; Palmer et al., 2019; Turnbull et al., 2013a); therefore continuing with school leaders throughout the recruitment and hiring process and into their first few years on the job (Gates et al., 2020; McManus, 2017; Palmer et al., 2019; Turnbull et al., 2013a).

According to Palmer et al. (2019), "the preparation of [educational leaders] across the United States increasingly reflects a grow-your-own mindset in which school districts identify and support aspiring leaders within their district" (p. 1). The Wallace Foundation created a model for principal pipeline programs that a number of districts, especially larger urban districts, utilize today (McManus, 2017; Palmer et al., 2019; Turnbull et al., 2013a; Turnbull et al., 2013b;

Turnbull et al., 2015; Turnbull et al., 2016a; Turnbull et al., 2016b). They started with the state and district leadership standards in mind. They centered on high-quality preservice training that is feedback-heavy and includes mentoring and coaching on what it is like to be a principal or a leadership position. The school districts also partnered with universities and were selective in who was accepted into their cohorts, and they were even more selective when it came to hiring. It was essential to the program providers that the right candidate for the school was selected. Finally, the supportive pipeline did not end after hiring a new principal. Mentors were assigned to novice principals, and there was consistent evaluation and feedback (McManus, 2017; Palmer et al., 2019; Turnbull et al., 2013a).

Researchers have made positive connections between certification programs, professional development, shadowing, mentoring, and building a school leadership pipeline for aspiring assistant principals (Anderson & Turnbull, 2019; Bickmore et al., 2021; Service et al., 2016). Schools that hired aspiring leaders who participated in a principal pipeline program sustained many benefits, including student learning and achievement (Mendels, 2017). As stated by Korbey (2019), “surprisingly, academic benefits were largest for the lowest-performing schools, which often pose the biggest challenges to improvement” (p. 2).

Districts with school leader pipeline programs have significantly benefited from developing a quality cohort of aspiring school leaders (Gates et al., 2020; McManus, 2017; Mendels, 2017; Palmer et al., 2019; Turnbull et al., 2013a). The benefits of school leader pipeline programs are not without inherent challenges. Research also shows that after time passes with a successful pipeline program, there are fewer leadership openings because there are not as many instances of turnover of the novices in those positions as in the past when pulling from a prepared cohort. Therefore, as time passes, the pipeline programs need to admit fewer and fewer

candidates if the district intends to retain all participants (Anderson & Turnbull, 2019; Gates et al., 2020; Mendels, 2017).

The study school district has not had an aspiring leader program since the winter of 2018. Since then, there has been significant turnover in district leadership, including the superintendency. With new leadership came new ideas about a pipeline program, but nothing came to fruition. Recently, more focus has been placed on supporting novice principals and district leaders and less on building a pool of teacher leaders who aspire to those positions. Additionally, the last time the district communicated about an aspiring principal program was in the spring of 2019. With those changes in district leadership and the COVID-19 global pandemic, the program did not restart. Therefore, there was a lack of preparation for those who aspire to leadership roles. According to an email sent to all employees in the district, the aspiring leadership program believed that “to be effective, leaders must have the knowledge, skillset, talent, and disposition that cannot be acquired in college courses alone and cannot be mastered without opportunities to learn from outstanding leaders in the profession” (District Newsflash, 2018).

While there is research on working with aspiring assistant principals and principals, except for the Wallace Foundation’s work, there is limited evidence connecting theory with practice in aspiring school leader programs. Many programs either focus on one or the other, not both. (Batagiannis, 2011; Bickmore et al., 2021; Turnbull et al., 2013a). More research is needed on connecting district leadership standards, practices, and initiatives with university certification programs to build a pool of candidates. This study examined how to build leadership capacity in aspiring educational leaders through professional development, including mentoring, shadowing, and coaching.

## **The Problem**

Many university-based leadership certification programs do not have the fiscal and human resources to provide aspiring school leaders with enough experience to demonstrate what they will face in a leadership role; in addition, they do not adequately prepare aspiring leaders instructionally or to serve their communities (FitzGerald & Militello, 2016; Taylor Backor & Gordon, 2015; Thessin & Clayton, 2013). Aspiring leaders benefit more from on-the-job experiences that can be provided through shadowing, coaching, mentoring, or a combination of both avenues (Service et al., 2016; Turnbull et al., 2013a). The district where the research took place lacked a pipeline program in recent years to build leadership capacity in aspiring leaders or “to increase the individual and collective abilities of professional staff” through professional development activities (Clark, 2017, p. 5).

### **Overview of the research site context**

This action research study took place in the Southern Magnolia cluster of a large urban school district, about 10 miles northeast of a major southeastern city in the United States. The cluster is in the third largest district in the state and consists of seven elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. The schools generally underperform academically and are high-need schools, with a large percentage of economically disadvantaged students and families. Throughout the cluster, 0.5% of students identify as American Indian or Alaskan Native, 3.1% as Asian or Pacific Islander, 3.1% as Black or African American, 92.2% as Hispanic or Latinx, 0.4% as multi-Racial, 0.6% as White or Caucasian, 100% are identified as economically disadvantaged, 83.2% as English Language Learners (ELLs), and 10.3% as Students with Disabilities (SWDs) (State Department of Education, 2022; State School Reports, 2022). Spanish is spoken as a primary language in over 90% of the homes. School leadership turnover in the

Southern Magnolia cluster was higher between 2018-2022 due to retirement, promotion, attrition, and job shifts (school principal, personal communication, May 2022). The stability of leadership and leaders understanding how to work with Southern Magnolia's stakeholders would benefit the community. According to Myung et al. (2011), there is generally higher turnover in leadership positions in areas that serve "high proportions of students who are poor, non-white, or do not speak English as their first language" (p. 696).

Aspiring leaders participated in a program during the 2023-2024 school year in which they were provided professional development and opportunities for shadowing and mentoring throughout the course of a school semester. This program aimed to combine theory and practice through applied learning opportunities. The program participants engaged in lectures and opportunities for real-world application of what they learned. The program aimed to combine both teaching and learning methods. "The goal is that every school – regardless of its student population, location, or surrounding economic circumstances – will have a leader who can work with faculty to increase student learning" (Bottoms et al., 2004, p. 1).

This action research study focused on building the capacity of aspiring leaders in one urban school cluster. The Southern Magnolia cluster's aspiring assistant principal program aimed to prepare future leaders to lead for student success through professional development that included shadowing, mentoring, and creating a school leader pipeline.

### **Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to improve a leadership development program for aspiring assistant principals in an urban school cluster.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What leadership behaviors do teachers in an aspiring leadership program identify as supportive in building their leadership capacity?
2. How did the aspiring leadership program participants describe the program's impact on their practice and understanding of leadership roles?
3. What did the action research team members learn through the process of implementing an aspiring leadership program?

### **Definition of Terms**

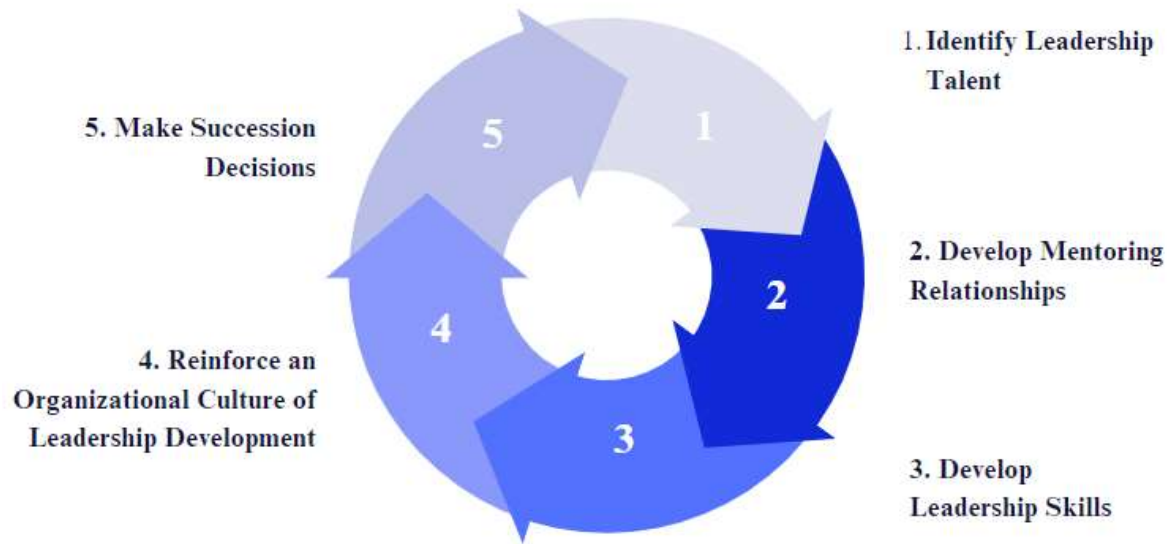
- “Aspiring Assistant Principal”: An aspiring assistant principal is an educator that is generally in a teacher leader role who would like to lead a school instructionally and operationally. These educators often need to complete a certification program in their state as well as have some practical experience in the field.
- “Build Capacity”: As stated in Clark (2017), building capacity “is a process to increase the individual and collective abilities of professional staff to continuously improve student learning” (p. 5).
- “Teacher Leaders”: Veteran teachers who are “school-based reformers [and] become owners and investors in the school, rather than tenants” (Barth, 2001, p. 443). Teacher leaders are generally serving in more than one leadership role in addition to being a fulltime classroom educator or support staff person.
- “Shadowing”: As stated in Service et al., (2016), “a peer-related professional development activity in which an aspirant principal is placed with a host practicing principal for a period of time... [and] is on-the-job learning, career development and leadership development intervention” (p. 255).

- “Mentoring”: As stated in Service et al., (2016), “described as a relationship that involves supporting, motivating, shaping, guiding and encouraging; and that helps a mentee reach his or her potential” (p. 256).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Roberts and Hyatt (2019) stated that a theoretical framework demonstrates the “lens through which your research problem is viewed” (p. 105). This study can be seen through the lens of leadership development and succession planning (Figure 1.1). Based on Groves’ (2007) theory of leadership development and succession planning, there are five major factors: developing mentoring relationships, identifying leadership talent, developing leadership skills, making succession decisions, and reinforcing an organizational culture of leadership development. Those themes are cyclically related to one another.

Jarvis (2019) described succession planning as “the process of developing leadership talent to meet the current and future strategic needs of the organization... [and involving] the strategic management of the flow of talent through an organization by creating and maintaining a talent pipeline” (p. 222). Companies like General Electric, Exxon, 3M, and Home Depot have followed this model and created leadership development programs in which managerial staff learn how to mentor more novice staff and develop them into leaders through mentoring and education (Groves, 2007). They have learned that it is imperative for organizations to continually develop leaders and build their leadership pipeline (i.e., build their bench) to attain short and long-term goals shaped by their mission and vision. It was found that it is essential to have a pipeline that can build on previous success (Salleh & Rahman, 2017; Gothard & Austin, 2013; Groves, 2007).

**Figure 1.1***Leadership Development and Succession Planning Framework*

*Note.* Adapted from Groves (2007).

### Logic Model

The action research team and its participants for this study were active in a cyclical process adopted by the school district and aligned to Deming's (1993) Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) Cycle. The continuous improvement cycle used in this action research (Figure 1.2) had three planning stages, two doing stages, and then moved to three monitoring stages. The plan stages involved identifying the need for improvement, clarifying purpose and goals, and adopting strategies. The do stages discussed establishing structures and implementing strategies. Meanwhile, the monitor stages allowed time to review, reflect, and refine (Figure 1.2). This iterative approach ensured that each phase of the process informed the next, leading to comprehensive and effective improvements in educational practices. Furthermore, the

collaborative nature of the process fostered a culture of continuous learning and adaptation, enabling the research team to respond dynamically to emerging challenges and opportunities.

**Figure 1.2**

*Continuous Improvement Cycle*



*Note.* Adapted from the school district’s continuous improvement framework.

The foundation of this study lies in the fact that improvement is increasingly effective when it is continuous or cyclical, much like the creation of the PDSA cycle (Moen & Norman, 2006). Dr. Deming worked on modifying his method, as did others from the early-mid 1900s until the current PDSA cycle that was discussed in 1993. The research began with ties to Galileo’s philosophy of science from the 1600s to Shewhart’s incorporation of the scientific method in 1939. Dr. Deming then held lectures in 1950 on his interpretation of that cycle, which eventually turned into the plan-do-check-act cycle and finally became the PDSA cycle in 1993 (Moen & Norman, 2006).

For this study, the “plan” phase began with the design team as they were planning for professional learning sessions and deciding how to implement coaching, shadowing, and mentoring at the respective schools as experiences for the aspiring leadership cohort. The types of sessions and experiences and how often they would occur were discussed. For the “do” phase,

the aspiring leaders participated in job-embedded professional development and real-world experiences to help guide and prepare them for a school or district leadership role. Finally, the “monitor” phase consisted of collecting data, reflection, and making modifications when and where necessary.

### **Theory of Change**

This action research study aimed to assist teachers who were aspiring assistant principals on their leadership journeys and to prepare them for the next level. This study was needed because the school district no longer had an active leadership pipeline program. They continued to have programs to assist novice assistant principals, principals, and district leaders but no longer offered programs for preparing aspiring leaders. Through the cyclical nature of the continuous improvement logic model, discussion occurred on whether professional learning sessions were enough to prepare aspiring leaders or if job-embedded preparation activities were also needed.

### **Overview of the Methodology**

This study was conducted using an action research methodology. According to Corey (1954), “action research in education is research undertaken by practitioners in order that they may improve their practices” (p. 375). Kemmis and McTaggart (1998), Zuber-Skerrit (1992), and Holter and Schwartz-Barcott (1993) stated that “action research originated with Kurt Lewin, an American psychologist” (as cited in Masters, 1995, para. 1). McKernan (1988 as cited in Masters, 1995) mentioned that “action research is a root derivative of the scientific method reaching back to the Science in Education movement of the late nineteenth century” (para. 1).

Action research was chosen for this study because of its “cyclical” ability to identify a problem, devise a plan, collect data, observe, and reflect. It was up to the action research team to carry out these steps in a continuous improvement framework (Karagiorgi et al., 2017). Data

collection for this study incorporated numerous qualitative methods. These methods were comprised of aspiring educational leaders and the action research team and included:

1. One-on-one interviews;
2. Focus groups;
3. Surveys and feedback forms; and
4. Observations of coaching and mentoring sessions.

### **Interventions**

Three cycles (i.e., plan, do, monitor) were conducted throughout this action research. Each cycle lasted approximately 6 weeks, for a total of 18 weeks. The action research team members and the cohort of participants used the shared instructional leadership theoretical framework and continuous improvement cycle or logic model (i.e., plan, do, monitor) to guide the study. The action research design team met every two weeks to discuss progress. The first cycle started the last week of July 2023 (i.e., July 24, 2023) and ended on September 1, 2023. The second occurred between September 5, 2023, and October 13, 2023. Finally, the third took place between October 16, 2023, and December 1, 2023.

As seen in Figure 1.2, During the “plan” phase, the design team identified the need for improvement, clarified the purpose, goals, and measures, and adopted evidence-based strategies. The design team was comprised of school and district leaders (i.e., school principals, regional superintendent, regional coordinators, assistant principals, the district Director of Leadership Development) and the researcher, an assistant principal.

The implementation team focused on the “do” phase, establishing structures, improving processes, and implementing strategies (Figure 1.2). In this phase, the cohort of the study, which

consisted of teacher leaders, participated in professional development sessions and mentoring, shadowing, and coaching opportunities.

The “monitor” phase was comprised of reviewing, reflecting, and refining as part of the continuous improvement process (Figure 1.2). During this phase, the design and implementation teams met biweekly to ensure the study was on track. At this time, they also made any necessary modifications.

### **Significance of the Study**

The action research conducted was designed to prepare teachers who are aspiring school or district leaders to attain those positions. As a qualitative study conducted with an action research team, it allowed the researcher and the team to be more reflective and take time to make modifications as needed. It also allowed the participants to provide feedback on the research. The results of this study are intended to contribute to the region and district as a way to reinvent their leadership pipeline programs.

### **Organization of the Dissertation**

Chapter 1 is the overview of the study. It introduces the research questions and the problem of practice. Chapter 2 examines literature related to the topic and discusses leadership pipeline programs and the components of an effective school leader. Chapter 3 describes the qualitative methodology and action research approach to the study. Chapter 4 explores the study's findings and describes the executed interventions. Chapter 5 analyzes the findings based on the action research cycles conducted. Finally, Chapter 6 serves as a summary of the study. The researcher compares the conclusions expected to the findings in connection with the research questions and provides recommendations for further research.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

Historically, research on aspiring educational leadership programs focused individually on either theory or practice, missing the connection between the two concepts (Jamison et al., 2020). Research addressing both concepts allows researchers to explore the professional development and real-world experiences provided to participants in aspiring educational leadership programs. (Cunningham & Sherman, 2008; Levine, 2005, as cited in Jamison et al., 2020). In contrast, more current programs seem to build principal pipeline programs and blend both practices to prepare aspiring leaders. Theory-based programs include graduate certification courses and professional development, while practice-based programs include but are not limited to shadowing, mentoring, coaching, and residency. By integrating theory and practice, researchers can better understand the symbiotic relationship between conceptual knowledge and practical application, enhancing the effectiveness of leadership development initiatives. (Bickmore et al., 2021; Service et al., 2016.; Thessin & Clayton, 2013).

The state where the study took place assesses its leaders using the Leader Keys Effectiveness System (LKES), which has four themes and eight standards, two under each theme (Figure B1). The themes are school leadership, organizational leadership, human resources leadership, professionalism, and communication. The standards are instructional leadership, school climate, planning and assessment, organizational management, human resources management, teacher and staff evaluation, professionalism, and communication and community relations (State Department of Education, 2021).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to improve a leadership development program for aspiring assistant principals in an urban school cluster.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What leadership behaviors do teachers in an aspiring leadership program identify as supportive in building their leadership capacity?
2. How did the aspiring leadership program participants describe the program's impact on their practice and understanding of leadership roles?
3. What did the action research team members learn through the process of implementing an aspiring leadership program?

To examine the research questions, the researcher worked with an action research team to study the development of aspiring school leaders in kindergarten through twelfth grade in the Southern Magnolia cluster. Various data were collected using observations, questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups.

A literature review on aspiring school leadership programs was conducted and separated into three sections to achieve the objectives. The first section provides an overview of aspiring school leadership programs. The second and final section discusses multiple leadership components.

### **Aspiring Leadership Programs**

Aspiring school and district leadership programs exist at the school or district level and at colleges and universities where certifications or graduate degrees are necessary. At the same time, many states require aspiring leaders to attain certifications before or soon after being

promoted to a school or district leadership position. Not all school districts have an in-house pipeline program (Gates et al., 2020; Education Development Center, 2023; Palmer, 2019). Many college and university-based programs are historically heavily theory-based, while many districts are seeing a need for opportunities for practical application in addition to or in connection with the graduate certification programs. More aspiring leadership programs are adding components like mentorship and the requirement of a leadership portfolio to ensure real-world experiences (Gates et al., 2020; McManus, 2017; Palmer et al., 2019; Ruggirello, 2024; Turnbull et al., 2013a).

### **Definition of an Aspiring School Leader**

An aspiring educational or school leader is generally a teacher leader who would like to lead a school instructionally and operationally. Aspiring school leaders must learn how to switch from “plant manager to leaders of instruction” to lead all aspects of the building for the best of all stakeholders: students, teachers, staff, parents, and community members (Hauge et al., 2014, p. 359). It “requires careful planning and skillful orchestration of human, cultural, and technological resources in schools” (Hauge et al., 2014, p. 358). Furthermore, cultivating effective communication and collaboration among stakeholders is essential for aspiring leaders to foster a positive and inclusive school culture conducive to academic success and development.

### **Teacher Leaders**

Teacher leaders are frequently veteran teachers who serve as team leaders, content leaders, or department chairs. Some, while not all, aspire to be school leaders eventually. Teacher leaders “experience personal and professional satisfaction, a reduction of isolation, a sense of instrumentality, and new learnings – all of which spill over into their teaching. As

school-based reformers, these teachers become owners and investors in the school, rather than tenants” (Barth, 2001, p. 443).

### **Graduate Certification Courses**

There have been many changes in educational leadership preparation programs in recent years. Jamison et al. (2020) found that:

University preparation programs in educational administration and leadership came under scrutiny in 2005 following Arthur Levine’s 2005 report on the status of such programs. Levine stated, “The findings of this report were very disappointing. Collectively, educational administration programs are the weakest of all the programs at the nation’s education schools. This is distressing not only because of the magnitude of the jobs principals and superintendents must perform, but also because of the large number of school leaders who will need to be hired in the next decade” (p. 578).

### **In-service Professional Development**

Tynjälä (2013, as cited in Daniëls, 2019) “identified three modes of workplace learning: incidental and informal learning, intentional but non-formal learning and formal training” (p. 119). Incidental and informal learning “are side effects of work,” while non-formal learning could be seen through “coaching or reflecting” (Daniëls, 2019, p. 119). In-service professional development is seen as formal training that includes “lectures, trainings, workshops, and courses” while working in a professional setting (Daniëls, 2019, p. 119). In addition to the three modes of workplace learning, school leadership professional development can refer to a combination of “cognitive theoretical ways of learning, cooperative and communicative process-oriented procedures, and reflective methods” (Huber 2011, as cited in Daniëls, 2019, p. 119).

## **Shadowing**

In education and for the purposes of this study, as stated in Service et al., (2016), “shadowing is defined as a peer-related professional development activity in which an aspirant principal is placed with a host practicing principal for a period of time. Shadowing is on-the-job learning, career development, and leadership development intervention” (p. 255). While this practice could potentially be beneficial in the field of education and for aspiring school leaders, there is a lack of research on this topic. Conversely, there is a wealth of information regarding on-the-job shadowing in the field of medicine. Workers shadow others as part of “hiring, internship, and on-boarding processes” (Service et al., 2016. p. 255).

Shadowing is often part of a clinical experience, in which students must complete a certain number of hours to complete a course or certification requirement. Reflection is also an essential part of the shadowing process. Students can discuss their observations and any new insights that they may have about the experience (Monahan et al., 2018; von der Lancken & Gunn, 2018). Fougner & Horntvedt (2011) argue that students in job-shadowing programs benefit from observing the “work environment, employment, and occupational skills... of the job role of the people in the team whom they are shadowing and deepen their understanding of the application of concepts and motivation for interprofessional collaboration” (as cited in Monahan et al., 2018, p. 104).

## **Mentoring**

While shadowing is just that, essentially following another around, mentoring goes further. For the purposes of this study, mentoring will be defined “as a relationship that involves supporting, motivating, shaping, guiding and encouraging; and that helps a mentee reach his or her potential” (Service et al., 2016, p. 256). Mentoring as a learning tool is a concept that occurs

in fields other than education, such as business and medicine. The most crucial thing in mentorship is the relationship between the mentor and mentee and the cultivation of that relationship throughout the process; trust is essential between the mentor-mentee pair (Jamison et al., 2020; Groves, 2007).

During a multiple case study analysis of mentor-mentee pairs in educational leadership, Thessin et al. (2020) developed the Educational Leadership Mentoring Framework (ELMF). The “study results revealed that each pair journeyed through the three phases of (a) establishing the mentoring relationship, (b) cultivating the mentoring relationship, and (c) learning and growing through the mentoring relationship” (as cited in Jamison, 2020, p. 581). Each stage is based on Knowles’ (1980) Theory of Andragogy (as cited in Jamison et al., 2020). In phases one and two, the mentees were given administrative tasks to perform with progressively more responsibility until phase three, when they demonstrated that they were ready to take on administrative duties completely (Jamison et al., 2020).

According to Groves (2007), “research on mentoring relationships in organizations provides strong evidence that employees with mentors are much more likely to experience a range of positive outcomes, including enhanced job performance, greater promotions and compensation, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction” (p. 244). There are a wide range of benefits from this type of relationship including “acceptance, encouragement, coaching, ... sponsorship, [and exposure to] challenging assignments” (p. 244).

### **Coaching**

Mentoring and coaching are very similar, and the words are sometimes used interchangeably. Coaching is not just seen in sports but in education and business as well. According to Hobson and Sharp (2005), as cited in Sardar and Galdames (2017):

There are various roles of mentors, such as: mentor as model, acculturator, sponsor, and supporter, but one form is closely linked with coaching, which is “mentor as educator: to listen, to coach, and to create appropriate opportunities for the mentee’s professional learning” (p. 49).

Both mentoring and coaching rely strongly on the relationships and trust that are built between the pairs. Educational coaching “is one of the aspects of mentoring which focuses on an individual’s skill development or improvement” (p. 49).

### **Residency**

“The administrative internship is the culminating capstone experience of an administrator preparation program at the university level and must provide ample practical experiences for interns to understand what it is to be a school or district-level administrator” (Barnett, 2004; Browne-Ferrigno, 2003; Cunningham & Sherman, 2008; Orr & Orphanos, 2011; Roach, Smith, & Boutin, 2011; Sherman & Crum, 2009, as cited in Jamison et al., 2020, p. 578).

### **Effective Leadership in High-Needs Schools**

The importance of effective leadership in any organization, including schools, could never be over-emphasized. In more ways than one, the leader of a school is the most influential individual in a school. The leader is responsible for all activities occurring within the school’s confines. The leader also sets the school’s tone and ensures that the school environment is suitable for learning (Singh & Townsley, 2020). The school leadership monitors the professionalism of the teachers and ensures they are motivated to execute their duties effectively. The leader is the primary link between the school and the surrounding community (Rivera-McCutchen, 2021). The leader’s performance considerably influences the teachers’, learners’, and parents’ attitudes toward the school. These duties and responsibilities require effective

school leadership (Mendels, 2012). An aspiring school leader program needs to determine the qualities of an effective school leader, especially in high-need schools (Rivera-McCutchen, 2021).

The role of a principal can be similar regardless of what type of school they lead. Their primary role is to provide strategic direction for the institution's system. School leaders assess teaching methods, develop standard curricula, monitor learner achievement, supervise teachers, revise policies, encourage parent involvement, administer the budget, and hire and staff (Lopez, 2019). Mendels (2012) provides five qualities of a school principal that enable them to perform these duties efficiently. First, the principal must be a visionary leader who establishes the school's vision of academic success based on high-performance standards. Influential leaders share and encourage everyone in the school to work towards actualizing the vision of improving the overall school performance. It causes the students and teachers to commit to establishing high success standards (Mendels 2012). The vision will act as a powerful sense of purpose that serves the principal's approach to leadership.

Their other duty is to create a hospitable climate that encourages safety, fruitful interaction, and a cooperative spirit (Mendels, 2012; Steele et al., 2021). These elements create an environment that fosters learning and makes learners feel safe, supported, and motivated to raise attainment. Creating a suitable learning environment involves many functions. At the same time, it encourages teachers to avoid working in isolation but allows them to collaborate and help one another enhance the institution's practices. Creating a positive learning environment also involves molding the school culture to encourage learners to focus on excelling in school.

School leaders' effectiveness is determined by how they influence the school culture and climate to generate an environment that supports learning and teaching (Singh & Townsley,

2020; Steele et al., 2021). Webster and Litchka (2021) explain that the school leadership must have a set of values that will guide them in promoting authentic learning and student growth concerning societal morals and ethics. Lopez (2019) adds that the principal creates a suitable learning environment by ensuring the safety of every person in the institution. School environments are vulnerable to hazards, attacks, threats, and disasters (Lopez 2019). Keeping the school environment safe and encouraging uninterrupted learning requires that the principal collaborates with emergency managers, first responder agencies, and law enforcement. Lopez (2019) observes that most school administrators lack the knowledge and skills to generate, enforce, and practice emergency procedures. However, collaborating with law enforcement can help them become effective leaders by creating safety policies that keep the school environment safe for learners.

Creating the appropriate learning environment, particularly in a school with high needs, could also imply generating an environment that facilitates community participation in running the school. As the school leader, a principal can lead efforts to encourage a collaborative environment with surrounding communities, so they support learning activities in the school. A study by Maier et al. (2017) outlines several benefits of this collaborative relationship. Consider rewriting the sentence. Their study pointed out that community support could help students access a wide variety of services that could enhance their academic achievement, such as medical care, transportation assistance, and counseling. Maier et al. (2017) add that collaboration with communities encourages trust between staff, parents, students, and community members, which could help to reduce absenteeism while encouraging improved academic performance.

Principals also cultivate teachers' leadership qualities and potential by facilitating them to work toward achieving the school's vision (Mendels, 2012). According to Rivera-McCutchen

(2021), involving a school's stakeholders in the vision encourages them to become visionaries, design thinkers, and leaders, creating an environment where they can share ideas on how to realize their vision. Rivera-McCutchen (2021) adds that this process involves the principal and teachers collaborating to lead the children toward realizing a shared vision. Effective leaders know they need to collaborate with the school staff by getting them to buy into the vision and encourage them to work toward achieving it.

Delegating leadership duties encourages the other staff to work together toward improving student performance. Rintoul and Bishop (2019) point out that the role of school leadership in Ontario has evolved over the years and shifted their primary duties from administration and supervisory to collaborating with teachers to generate a vision, evaluate and implement their school's curricula, and implement effective instruction models. Rivera-McCutchen (2021) also emphasizes a principal's vital role in creating and communicating a clear school vision with the rest of the stakeholders in the school. Rivera-McCutchen (2021) indicates that communication about the vision should be accompanied by the leader encouraging conversations about pertinent issues and helpful and regular feedback on teaching practices concerning their adherence to the school vision.

Effective principals enhance instruction to empower teachers to perform at their best and encourage students' learning (Mendels, 2012). They determine the quality of teaching or instruction in their school. For instance, a school principal could insist that their teachers embrace evidence-based practices when issuing instructions. They could also take time to monitor teaching practices, establish those that work, and recommend that teachers use approaches that have a higher chance of delivering desired learning goals. Rivera-McCutchen (2021) explains that leadership can motivate teachers to perform at their best by making them

feel respected and safe in the school. Empowering teachers also involves encouraging authentic connections within the school communities and modeling new teachers and community members to align with the school's standards and expectations.

Mendels (2012) emphasizes that effective school leaders improve performance by managing processes, data, and people. Managing people entailed hiring qualified personnel and adopting practices to retain them and ensure they do their best. Singh and Townsley (2020) point out that ineffective school leadership causes teachers to resign and seek opportunities in other schools where they will receive better support from the leadership. Thus, effective principals find ways to motivate and demonstrate to the teachers that they are valued in the school to generate teacher motivation and job satisfaction. Managing data and processes involve examining evidence-based information that could improve performance and incorporating these into the institution's systems.

Rivera-McCutchen (2021) proposes five alternative qualities that define the effectiveness of a school leader. The study's findings by Riviera-McCutchen (2021) were motivated by the generally disadvantaged social, cultural, and economic status that the authors describe as defining the Black community in the US. Rivera-McCutchen's qualities of an effective Black principal include adopting a robust social justice and antiracist stance, encouraging authentic relationships, believing in learners' and teachers' capacity for excellence and growth, and embracing radical hope. Embracing social justice and antiracism helps disadvantaged schools to improve and catch up with privileged institutions. For instance, Rivera-McCutchen (2021) observes that majority white, upper-middle-class schools in New York operate based on a system that encourages exploration and choice, while those in low-income, more diverse locations are based on testing and standardization and tend to promote a school-to-prison pipeline. In this case,

social justice would involve advocating for a change in teaching systems to give disadvantaged communities equal opportunity at excelling in life as those learners in White privileged schools.

Cultivating authentic relations involves fostering a caring culture in the school and surrounding communities (Rivera-McCutchen, 2021). It consists of the school leadership facilitating the rest of the school to realize that they are a critical community component. Effective leadership also involves creating a friendly environment in school that makes learners recognize that they are led by a principal who cares for them unconditionally and is not an authoritative stranger. The resultant interpersonal relationship and connection between the leadership and the students facilitate the principal to motivate the learners to work hard toward achieving success (Rivera-McCutchen, 2021). It also helps the learners develop a holistic perception of success beyond academic performance. Effective leaders create an environment that facilitates authentic and personal relations with teachers, encouraging mutual respect and staff retention (Rivera-McCutchen, 2021). It helps the teachers develop an attitude that they are not teaching out of a sense of duty but because they are part of the school community working toward a common goal of success.

Believing in teachers' and students' capacity for growth entails motivating them to push their boundaries and pursue new knowledge and innovative solutions to their challenges (Rivera-McCutchen, 2021). Effective school leaders encourage students and teachers to experiment with new ideas and not fear challenges. The principal can lead the way by networking with institutional leaders from other locations and engaging in conversations concerning growing as a leader and educator and improving education. Additionally, it involves encouraging the teachers to believe in their students and, in so doing, encouraging the learners to develop a culture of excellence. Rivera-McCutchen (2021) further explains that believing in the students entails

concentrating less on students' progression across the grades and more on their life chances and the general improvement of the disadvantaged community.

Cultivating hope involves encouraging the school community to believe in an end to the socioeconomic problems they face, including poverty, hate, and wars (Rivera-McCutchen, 2021). An effective leader can incite hope in learners and teachers by developing a vision that encourages them to achieve anything. It involves encouraging them to use available resources to generate rich, rigorous, and authentic learning experiences that will improve their lives. Rivera-McCutchen (2021) observes that leaders must know the student community well before designing a school system that meets their needs and exemplifies hope. Óskarsdóttir et al. (2020) concur by stressing that understanding learners' special education needs allows school leaders to develop inclusive education that addresses the racism and discrimination issues responsible for learner dropout and school failures. Since the school leadership ensures positive outcomes in their institutions, they play an essential role in initiating and driving the change process to improve achievement. The change process may necessitate turn-around leadership, which Lochmiller and Chesnut (2017) define as actions that identify underlying reasons for poor student performance and develop models to enhance achievement while monitoring the effectiveness of these techniques over time.

Meeting these definitions of effective leaders requires the school leadership to embrace a leadership style that will enable them to motivate the learners and teachers to perform at their best without micromanaging them. The style that best suits this definition is the transformative leadership style. Sorkin (2019) defines transformative leadership as a governance system rooted in hope, faith, critical thinking, solidarity, and love. Sorkin (2019) adds that transformative leadership goes beyond defining the leader's traits and characteristics because it fosters life-

giving relations between the follower and the leader. Transformative leadership makes a principal's school effective by facilitating leadership beyond the relationship between a leader and followers. It intentionally and mainly allows a leader to adopt an entire thinking ecosystem encompassing the environment inside and beyond the school's boundaries. Thus, a leader who embraces this leadership style will engage with the surrounding communities and work with other educational institutions to improve their institution's performance.

School leadership is critical because it determines the institution's success and achievement. Effective school leadership involves creating a school climate that supports learning. Qualities that define an effective leader include their ability to develop and actualize a school vision, cultivate authentic relations in the school community, and promote social justice and antiracism in the school and society (Steele et al., 2021).

### **Social Justice Leadership and its Effects on School Climate**

The concept of social justice translates to the reconstruction of society by applying the values of equity, inclusion, and recognition. It has caught the interest of academics, professionals, and legislators as a solution for dealing with social, educational, and economic issues that are present in many different contexts (Caliskan, 2020). When it comes to school settings, to address social justice challenges while promoting a positive school culture and climate, academic leaders are expected to bring to light and come up with a solution to the injustices, stigmatization, and social inequality that exist in the domains of ethnicity, gender, impairment, sexual identity, among others (Caliskan, 2020). For this purpose, "social justice leadership" was created to describe the leadership techniques used in educational contexts to address social justice concerns.

Culturally competent principals constructively influence educational climates in schools, which supports equal learning (Barakat et al., 2021; Steele et al., 2021). Educational leadership training programs must develop culturally sensitive school leaders. Culturally sensitive leadership is a requirement of education for equity and social justice since school leaders establish an institution's purpose, attitude, and path, and cultural sensitivity is a key component of these results (Barakat et al., 2021). Nevertheless, due to a mismatch between theory and reality, educational leaders frequently lack the skills or knowledge necessary to effectively promote social justice in their academic institutions. According to Barakat et al. (2021), most American programs for training educational leaders do not effectively or expressly prepare for social justice (Barakat et al., 2021). Since students are susceptible to affirmative information and tend to disregard contrary information, changing students' attitudes through formal education is difficult. Additionally, improving students' cultural competency abilities has long been an elusive aim for programs that prepare leaders.

The focal point of educational advancement is the principal. The principalship is a crucial change agent in the recent recovery changes in the United States (Woulfin & Weiner, 2019). In the period of transparency, leaders must handle a dizzying array of responsibilities, from assessing teachers and improving success to developing fair disciplinary procedures and working with community members. American rehabilitation plans, in particular, place the principal as "crucially important both in sparking the immediate transformation and in operating as a teacher during the ensuing procedures" in their efforts to improve persistently poorly performing schools (Torrance et al., 2021). Recruiting a "turnaround" headmaster to guide the institution toward success is one of the core principles of turnaround restructuring (Woulfin & Weiner, 2019). This kind of leader is seen as having the expertise and abilities to support a quick, profound change to

modify educator practices and, as a result, improve learning outcomes (Woulfin & Weiner, 2019). According to Singer (2020), modern institutionalism, which has provided important information about the social formation of institutions and the inertia of historical institutional arrangements, is being extensively used in research on organizational dynamics in education. According to Romero and Krichesky (2018), the turnaround head teacher has been portrayed as a superhero, impacting how these school administrators—who work mostly in urban and underprivileged districts—are trained, supported, supported, and kept in their positions.

School systems worldwide still deal with persistent budget cuts, student population growth, performativity expectations, and high-stakes accountability (Miller, 2019). School administrators work in environments where national educational policy is continuously changing. The academic policy climates demand more from fewer resources and a significant increase in the nation's economic development (Miller, 2019). Due to these problems, several critics and educational administrators have suggested that schools are now more focused on national economic growth than social reform (Tian & Huber, 2019). According to Miller (2019), many tensions caused by the method used to make educational policy are centered on this expanding disparity.

Additionally, it serves as the setting for several conflicts brought on by national governments' policy machinery and acted out in classrooms (Miller, 2019). According to Miller (2019), implementing government policy, providing students with an education that prepares them to profit from teaching in the ways advocated, and maintaining staff engagement and motivation all conflict at this point. How can school leaders promote social justice when educational policy seems to be at odds with social justice values?

Creating an atmosphere in which all learners, regardless of their backgrounds, have equal opportunity for access to quality education should be the goal of efforts to achieve social justice in education (Gümüş et al., 2021). Scholars have proposed that schools may make a significant difference and promote social change in response to many nations' social and intellectual disparities. According to Gümüş et al. (2021), this notion is by no means unique. It is crucial to establish a school environment that represents all facets of social justice (Gümüş et al., 2021). According to Gümüş et al. (2021), it is crucial to put into reality the ideas of equitable provision of educational resources and providing equal opportunity for students to excel in the classroom by using critical thinking and practice.

School leadership practice is primarily shaped and guided by educational policy. Like other academic institutions, schools do not occur in a vacuum and cannot operate without state government regulations (Miller, 2019). According to Adams and Khojasteh (2018), the probability of school administrators' support and their eventual success must be enhanced. This requires building educational policies that draw on the real-world experiences of individuals working in various educational contexts so that the policies created are more comprehensive and more representative of the reality of all institutions within a national education system (Miller, 2019). According to Miller (2019), education policy should support and emancipate the work of school leaders instead of undermining it or making it look that way. The results of this study indicated that conceptual, ethical, and perceptual issues might improve strong leadership and undermine its efficacy (Miller, 2019). According to Farrelly et al. (2017), legislators, school leaders, policy intentions, and how these conflicts affect school leadership practice are all brought into brilliant light by policies that are neither value-neutral nor context-neutral.

Especially in different urban school contexts, head teachers must maintain an adaptable approach to leadership (Prier, 2019). School administrators who are adaptable instead of technical-minded are receptive to shifting social, political, and economic conditions (Singer, 2020). They can speak several languages to comprehend a situation and know various players, such as the church community. Additionally, flexibility responds to the many ideologies, beliefs, and interests linked to policy-making choices that benefit multiple constituents within the school and community (Prier, 2019). According to Prier (2019), adaptive school leaders manage pinch points that may otherwise cause turmoil within the group. Urban school leaders who are flexible and practical view their institutions as engines for broader social and political transformation in the neighborhood and society. The emotional dimensions of educational leadership themselves are just one of its many components (Grosland & Roberts, 2021). Leaders are frequently embroiled in politically and emotionally heated issues like demonstrations and voting procedures.

School administrators who support social justice leadership to support their climate and culture are positioned to confront the inequitable consequences that educational environments inevitably create (Huchting & Bickett, 2021). In their leadership training programs and beyond, school leaders must have a broad and deep grasp of social justice if they are to reform unequal institutions. According to Huchting & Bickett (2021), some schools are considered economically elite environments, which may eventually lead to "economic elite dominance." Social justice leadership is required in these situations to challenge the status quo.

Huchting & Bickett's (2021) findings indicate that while graduates enhanced their sense of self-leadership for transformation, they frequently encountered difficulty while seeking to improve things because of societal and political constraints (Huchting & Bickett, 2021).

Graduates often had divergent beliefs from those of their peers, which caused alienation and burnout. Huchting & Bickett (2021) emphasize graduate students' perspectives on the implications for professional development to run socially just schools that address the intricate issues that obstruct ambitions for social justice. The Accountability Generation is experiencing the emergence of a new leadership paradigm (Heffernan, 2018). According to Szeto (2020), because intermediate leadership plays a crucial role in synchronizing the top-down approach to policy execution and the bottom-up practices of teachers in the classroom in highly responsible situations, school leadership practice at all school levels is closely related.

According to Caliskan (2020), to provide refugee children with a socially just and equitable learning environment, school principals were highly reliant on the dynamic forces that influenced them. The social justice strategies of school administrators are particularly impacted by the significant socioeconomic obstacles faced by refugees and the naïve and confusing government policies regarding the education of refugee pupils (Caliskan, 2020). According to Rivera-McCutchen (2021), schools require leaders who are committed to transformational caring, reject harmful educational practices to the most marginalized groups, and develop the internal capacity of the institution. To achieve this, admittance into academic leadership development programs must be based on a selection and recruitment procedure that identifies applicants with excellent leadership traits and works to build their leadership ability with ethics of radical caring (Rivera-McCutchen, 2021). According to Rivera-McCutchen (2021), faculty members in academic leadership programs should also commit to practicing transformational compassion in their own instructional practices to set an example for their learners.

One of the most noticeable changes is the rising demand for school principals to serve as instructional leaders in their facilities, ultimately in charge of developing a comprehensive

educational approach that meets all students' requirements and enhances all instructors' pedagogical skills (Farley et al., 2019). Districts and state organizations also expect school administrators to maintain a pleasant school atmosphere (Levy et al., 2017). ESSA stipulates that new non-academic indicators of school quality must be included and operationalized in state plans utilizing a variety of metrics, such as rates of punishment and suspensions, persistent absenteeism, and student surveys. According to Farley et al. (2019), the need for a new kind of school leader who seeks to make systems and schools more equal for all children is also developing. There are certain leaders who, via their attitudes and ideals, exhibit equity-oriented leadership. Society's ideals are reflected in public schools (Trujillo et al., 2021). Their portrayals reflect the values and standards that society has decided to instill in its populace and ingrained presumptions about the goals of public education.

To preserve a school atmosphere sensitive to ethnic, religious, racial, socioeconomic, and cultural origins, the extent to which school administrators engage in social justice leadership practices has come to the forefront (Caliskan, 2020). There are various injustices, inequities, or marginalizations for children at schools. Each injustice results from the several systems operating around the educational system. School administrators are expected to take the lead in fostering a climate where social justice and fairness are upheld in this complex and interlinked organization (Caliskan, 2020). Schools are immersed in a complicated social framework as open-system institutions. As a result, the cumulative effect of the various complex social systems affects how school leaders implement social justice practices to some level.

### **Planning and Assessment**

Twenty-first-century activities frequently include high levels of competition. Education is one of the sectors that require the development of competitive strategies as institutions and

individuals seek to advance their knowledge and become better than others. One way to ensure high competitiveness in education is by using data analysis, proper planning, and improvement strategies. This paper presents a literature review on educational leadership, focusing on data sources discussing data-driven planning and assessment. Learning organizations that have been able to utilize data-driven planning and application are ranked as educational leaders (DeJear Jr. et al., 2018).

Education advancement has been experienced over several decades. The introduction of the digital age and data-driven systems forces the education sector to advance and remain competitive. This literature review aims to gather and evaluate information regarding advancement in the education sector. The review focuses on the positive changes that technology and systems' advancements cause to different areas in the education sector. Assessment of major education leaders and their strategies can contribute to understanding how changes have been witnessed in the sector. The review also focuses on the key influences of change in the education sector to data-driven planning and assessment in evaluating performance and development. Through this literature, the researcher strives to understand the key pillars that drive education institutions from the traditional approach to the current model of learning management (Peddell et al., 2020).

Learning institutions have advanced education through performance assessments using data-driven systems in recent years. DeJear Jr. et al. (2018) state that institutions marked as educational leaders have shifted from traditional assessment forms to data-driven decision-making (DDDM) practices that inform education activities worldwide. Institutions have been developing a study culture that encourages stakeholders to focus on performance statistics compared to the traditional approach that utilizes qualitative assessment. Peddell et al. (2020)

concur that high-performing educational institutions worldwide have shifted to statistically monitoring and reporting students' performance and progress, which is the approach they use to assess their teachers' performance. Education systems advance their practices by collecting data, analyzing it, explaining it, predicting future performances, and providing them with targets, objectives, and goals (DeJear Jr. et al., 2018). Thus, the presence of data-driven planning and assessment in the education sector is an approach of the 21<sup>st</sup> century driven by global changes and the need to maintain competitiveness and performance.

Education leaders, using data-driven planning and assessment strategies, display characteristics that contribute to the effectiveness of this approach in maintaining high performance in learning institutions. Peddell et al. (2020) state that the sustenance of high results in leading institutions resulted from factors such as the behavior of the school leaders, the use of a strategic approach, and the structure of the improvement programs. The use of data-driven decision-making strategies is one of the key characteristics of high performers in educational leadership. Courtney (2021) argues that the ability to develop logic, perform accurate data analysis, and make the best learning plans can only be achieved by using educational data. He proposes that one of the main data analysis procedures schools and learning institutions should consider is exploratory data analysis (EDA), which allows practitioners to make well-informed decisions in planning and assessing performance. EDA produces accurate solutions, quick data, and an easily understandable process, making it effective and efficient in performance management.

Data-driven planning and assessment is an approach that gathers its strengths from regular data collection and analysis. Data changes are experienced daily, and the approach requires timely and regular updates. Therefore, many educational leaders have made it official

for the institutions to keep updating the data in the system daily or hourly. For instance, Harshman & Yeziarski (2017) provides that in most learning institutions and subjects such as chemistry, data is gathered and recorded from students daily, making it easy to perform assessment and determine the areas in which students require improvement or support. He specifies that teaching practitioners are entitled to instructional practice through data-driven inquiry, which offers a better guide towards the best teaching practice in the institutions. Young et al. (2018) argue that data-driven decision-making (DDDM) goes beyond helping instructors and educational practitioners to organizational assessment and ranking. Young et al. (2018) indicate that a data-driven assessment approach contributes to increased accountability and expectations made by policymakers and school leaders. Through DDDM, better-defined solutions to specified problems are realized and applied, increasing competitiveness in learning institutions.

Advancement in the education sector and the positive contributions of data-driven planning and assessment are experienced by institutions that embrace a data-driven decision-making approach. The contributions of a data-driven approach to educational improvement happen through several experiences that emerge from using this approach in education centers. A data-driven approach to education institution development is attained through several contributions to the approach. First, a data-driven approach to educational leadership ensures the development of a continuous improvement culture in learning institutions (Kaufman et al., 2019). DDDM is one of the applicable approaches that has seen the advancement of the education sector through planning and assessment to ensure a holistic approach to learning and minimal omissions and errors. Kaufman et al. (2019) state that a data-driven approach has been in use for some decades as the government and learning institutions work towards increasing

accountability and responsiveness in the education sector. A good illustration of the application of DDDM is the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015. NCLB was formulated to ensure that education is inclusive and embraces diversity. The application of the act ensured that data on children receiving an education was kept in place, which assisted in the management of education in the United States. ESSA, made in 2015, also works similarly to ensure that data is used for the continuous development of the education sector. Thus, a data-driven approach in educational leadership ensures continuous improvement in learning institutions.

Secondly, a data-driven approach to educational leadership is a practice that enhances ethical standards. According to Wang (2019), DDDM is used for a series of reasons that maximize on morality of education and ethics in learning. Data-driven decisions are used to identify underlying problems, set objectives, evaluate options, and make decisions. The key reason for this approach is to contribute positively to the development of the education sector through educational leadership. Wang (2019) states that DDDM acts by ensuring accountability and continuous improvement for all students in specified education institutions. Legislation such as NCLB ensures inclusivity and diversity in the education sector, which is part of moral and ethical obligations fostered by data-driven decisions. Thus, DDDM observes morality and ethical conduct, which makes it beneficial in the learning environment.

Additionally, data-driven planning and assessment in education leadership have simplified education management in most institutions, resulting in increased performance and positive progress. Young et al. (2018) indicate that DDDS has been one of the simplest approaches to planning and assessing educational progress. He indicates that this approach simulates the application of a decision support system, which has been attributed to

simplification and accuracy of risky decisions in management. The approach initiates an increased level of accountability and improvement, which are associated with development, performance improvement, and efficiency (DeJear Jr. et al., 2018). Therefore, DDDM has contributed positively to education advancement and development, a key requirement for maintaining responsiveness and competitiveness.

The competitiveness of the 21<sup>st</sup> century requires the application of approaches such as data-driven decision-making. The use of this approach in educational leadership is attributed to the development of educational institutions, creating a gap between institutions that use the approach and those stuck in the traditional approach. Sources indicate that an education system that uses this approach has displayed sustenance of high performance in their results, use of informed decisions to raise performance levels, and easier and more accurate methods of solving education problems (DeJear Jr. et al., 2018). A data-driven decision-making approach has led to increased continuous improvement, observing morality, and simplified learning management. DDDM can do more in educational leadership, which can be realized through further research. Therefore, the need exists to examine the contributions of data-driven planning and assessment in educational leadership (DeJear Jr. et al., 2018; Young et al., 2018).

### **Organizational and Operational Management**

School leadership substantially impacts educators, school culture, and organizational structure. Often, the impacts on the student outcomes are indirect through direct influence on teaching and culture, learning environment, and organization. Most leadership actions work subtly to enhance the setting for the instructional process through direct motivation and support. Regardless of school leadership level, all school leaders have a vital role in offering guidance and fostering a positive learning environment (Steele et al., 2021).

Ajayi et al. (2019) report that the quality of school managers' development substantially impacts the schools' operations. The effectiveness of any school is mainly determined by how well its components operate. The study suggested that it is inevitable that a more significant proportion of primary education outputs cannot stand by themselves and assist toward the realization of the nation's objectives and goals. This affects how well school administrators run their businesses and their ability to benefit those they engage with. Indeed, if the school manager's development is poor quality, it is likely that there will never be any significant impact (Ajayi et al., 2019). The level of inclusive growth achieved through time, based on predetermined goals, determines the effectiveness of operations and the success of just about any school leader. Therefore, responding to the quality issue is essential instead of the standard, which is often considered central to quality. Myende et al. (2018) noted that school leadership's independent effort to establish cooperative participation and transparency within financial management through participative management strategy provides a policy and practice with the capacity to develop co-responsibility governance instead of becoming a pathological problem.

Failure to account for the generation and distribution of finances among some school leaders remains problematic in many schools (Myende et al., 2018). The study reports widespread financial mismanagement and embezzlement in schools, particularly in South Africa. Confusion among school governors regarding whether principals or school governing bodies oversee financial management is one of the factors contributing to the mismanagement and misappropriation of finances. Secondly, the school leaders lack the necessary financial management skills, regarding the school as a source of economic enrichment, and disregard the law (Myende et al., 2018). Financial management issues are not isolated cases in South Africa; they are issues seen in schools worldwide. Decman et al. (2018) report that superintendents

significantly impact the school development level in response to instructional behaviors.

Although the Educational Leadership Constituents Council (ELCC) standards are predominantly a paradigm pertaining to the United States' education system, the constraints school administrators encounter are considerably more universal (Decman et al., 2018). The problems faced by school administrators worldwide are intensifying in response to increased demand as well as elements like globalization, migration, and technological integration. The study suggests that the debate regarding school leadership has gained substantial significance globally (Decman et al., 2018). Therefore, there is a need for policymakers to consider school leaders as the propellers of school development.

Sebastian et al. (2018) note that the school leaders' time allocation and how they spend it have a significant impact on the management and operations of the school. The task of school leaders has become more complicated. School heads must balance their time between various tasks and engage with multiple parties. It is essential to understand how school leaders divide their time between different tasks to gain insight into the condition of their work, its constraints, and its responsibilities (Sebastian et al., 2018; Lim, 2019). Considerable limitations on how school leaders spend their working days have resulted from the profound shifts in the legislative framework of public schools in recent years, which have increased pressures on them to meet various and diversified tasks (Sebastian et al., 2018). Thus, recent reforms to teacher assessment methods and specific school leaders' professional development activities suggest that administrators can take on additional significant tasks relative to their current duties (Sebastian et al., 2018; Lim, 2019). As the education system has evolved and become more diverse over the past two decades in England, a new group of practitioners has been established (Creaby, 2021). The England case offers an in-depth understanding of how changes in education affect

organizational and operational management in schools. The study reports that the new group of practitioners established is known as "school business leaders who operate as a distinct system (Creaby, 2021). Therefore, apart from the time allocation of the principals, the disintegration of duties is another component rising in the school leadership because of education evolution.

A considerable number of factors affect organizational and operational management in school leadership. The literature highlights some of these factors worldwide and reports some measures that can be implemented to mitigate the challenges affecting the leaders. Indeed, it is essential to understand how school management functions since school leaders are responsible for influencing society and molding the teaching profession.

### **Communication and Community Relations**

Household and community engagement in schools requires parents, school leaders, and community members to work closely together to increase opportunities and chances before, during, and after school life to enhance the learners' development, learning, and well-being. This is especially beneficial for students of minority groups or lower socio-economic status (Wright & Kim, 2022). Family and community engagement impact the learners in various ways, such as enhancing social skills and experiences, improving performances, and encouraging better learner behavior.

The major goal of ESSA is to improve results for each student, including disadvantaged learners and low-income students. Family engagement is also an essential part of the law. Education gaps can be narrowed when all stakeholders, families, schools, learners, and community members work together to reach the goal of advancing learner achievement. ESSA offers numerous opportunities and chances for family commitment, though community and schools create the conditions first required to effectively construct associations with households

dedicated to their students' learning (Amiot et al., 2020). One main phase of creating these requirements is a high-value parent and family commitment policy at both the community and school points.

The written parent and household commitment policy elaborates how a region or school will support households' vital role in their students' education. Each region and community that receives the Title I, Part A funding must have a documented parent and family engagement compact and policy. A similar is needed for every Title I school. Based on Public Law 114-195, Section 1116, school regions and schools receiving Title I, Part A funds are compulsory to develop cooperatively with, approve upon, and allocate to households of partaking kids a written parent and household engagement policy (Bertrand, 2018).

The parent and household engagement policy is vital for these institutions. It establishes the community expectations for household engagement and the vision at the regional and community levels. It sets the phase for direct collaboration with families. It develops system-diverse policies and experiences that welcome households, integrate their opinions, and assist each person in their role in improving learner achievement (Bertrand & Rodela, 2018). At the school level, the documented parent and family engagement policy pledges a school to goals and activities to develop partnerships between the school and home and identify how the goals and activities will be initiated. It is a prospect for flawless communication and powerful collaboration with families.

In school organizations, transformational leadership is hypothesized as the system that creates the environment for teachers to participate in constant learning via collaboration with coworkers and operate with the school community to develop and create consent surrounding the standard vision and goals. Transformational leadership designates a wide range of principles to

set a shared vision for the school and establish an environment for a school's stakeholders, including families and community partners, to participate in achieving common objectives (Rodela & Bertrand, 2018).

School leaders are vital in providing and cultivating opportunities for stakeholder engagement, including teachers, families, and community partnerships. Positive attitudes toward parental interaction start from the top down (i.e., with the school leader (Pushor & Amendt, 2018). Family engagement in schools should be reciprocal, meaningful, and equally beneficial in promoting each learner's academic achievement and health. The school leaders should work hard to build and retain solid relationships among the school employees and families. Parents are an asset and the first vital teachers to their children.

Therefore, the school leaders are encouraged to be approachable, transparent, open, and all-inclusive in every interaction with households and community supporters. Suggested rules and guidelines for involvement include acting equally with integrity and encouraging the learners. Given that an option for participation fits within the school-developed family-community engagement policy, the school would progress (Epstein, 2018). Considering other people's perspectives is important for the success of the community and schools. Operating an underachieving school requires much heavy lifting, and each stakeholder must be ready to help. Therefore, the school leaders should be clear about expectations for involvement.

Education in the modern period deals with several changes that necessitate structural reform (Qaralleh, 2021). As a result, educational institutions are looking to use community partnerships as a cornerstone of their planned advancements to construct and even reform partnerships with all groups in various areas. In this context, a community partnership denotes a dedication between two parties (school and the community) that necessitates cultivating

collaboration and mutual support to achieve broad social objectives. It is an approach that allows both actors to participate, each according to their competency, and has been shown to improve instructional operations. Partnerships and relationships between the community and schools are critical to the success of any educational system.

The shifting demographics caused by immigration allow school officials to work with immigrant families of various cultural and language backgrounds with English as a Second or Other Language (ESOL) (Okoko, 2019). Beliefs and assumptions separate competent from incompetent school leaders since the principles held by people who are members of a culture impact the leadership strategy and their drive for success, status, authority, and allegiance. According to Qaralleh (2021), few school leadership initiatives encourage school leaders to take cross-cultural education classes. Furthermore, principals' understanding of the relationships between promoting diversity and student performance is sometimes limited. According to Qaralleh (2021), school leadership is the primary cornerstone around predicting diverse communities' growth.

Universities' education collaborators have a huge potential to help institutions transition from school-led, conservative methods to family participation to an asset-based, empowerment approach (Albrecht, 2021). Educators face cognitive dissonance when they integrate their growing multilingual families into their children's lives at school and learn from their knowledge resources. According to Albrecht (2021), this pathway may be viewed as a series of steps that begin with meeting grant-related school – family – community criteria. It should ultimately result in an engaged family – school – community coalition that promotes all learning community members.

Moreover, the number of local educational collaborations that assist schools and help children and teenagers achieve better outcomes has skyrocketed (Dudley et al., 2020). They have taken on the strategic management of education in the community, catalyzing change, and facilitating linkages and projects amongst schools. According to Dudley et al. (2020), most of these collaborations include schools adopting voluntary accountability for a certain area's group performance. A school-led, local improvement collaboration implies that schools bear responsibility, if not accountability, for guaranteeing that every institution has the resources it needs to develop and succeed. This method emphasizes cross-school collaborative effort and partnership work.

The participation of teachers in the implementation of schoolwide strategies for collaboration is a crucial driver of their effectiveness (Jung & Sheldon, 2020). Teachers are in the greatest position to encounter families and establish the closest ties continuously. Constructing classroom and home tasks involving families in their students' education, constructing clear channels of communication with all families, and individually welcoming families into the school and classroom are examples of teacher practices that have been shown to steer to solid school–family collaborations. Teachers can also strengthen personal links with families by holding parent-teacher meetings and making house calls, which have been linked to increased school participation and academic success (Jung & Sheldon, 2020). Teachers may play an important role in boosting families' awareness of schools by using these collaboration activities. Teachers assist parents in becoming more aware and powerful partners in their children's education.

According to Jung and Sheldon (2020), the work of a school principal is naturally complicated and multifaceted, and research shows that their involvement in fostering school–

family connections is similarly complicated. To attain educational objectives in school systems and meet their social obligations, the school principal must develop a favorable school atmosphere focused on psychological stability, peacefulness, and excellent understanding and solidarity. A feeling of immediacy is developing for communities and schools to work collaboratively on challenges and opportunities as they desire to remain competitive in the future grows, as does the struggle of building a successful workforce (Qaralleh, 2021). As a result, true connections and relationships between schools and the surrounding communities should be created to form productive relationships that achieve the aims of all involved parties. It is also critical to fully understand the interconnections between communities and schools, particularly from the perspective of community stakeholders.

Principals oversee the distribution of resources and strengthen the capacity of schools to undertake effective team-building projects (Jung & Sheldon, 2020). They also act as strong champions for families, teachers, and school personnel to work together to improve children's educational experiences. School leadership techniques such as collaborative leadership and transformational leadership are helpful for school reform, managing obstacles, developing organizational capabilities, and attaining innovations.

Educational systems' effectiveness depends on partnerships and relationships between schools and the community. Integrating school leadership characteristics for collaborations with schools and teacher approaches to family participation is crucial. School leaders play an important role in encouraging community collaboration. There is a paradigm change that school administrators must be aware of. The transition from conventional parental participation to an alliance for empowerment has attracted attention in recent years. Furthermore, coping with diverse cultural and linguistic newcomer families is critical for school leadership development.

Community involvement and resource development professionalism are critical to establishing and maintaining engaged institutions.

### **Chapter Summary**

Some aspiring leadership programs lack a connection between teaching theory and practice. Leadership candidates need to receive quality instruction and professional development, and they also need to be provided with situations in which they can experience real-world application (Jamison et al., 2020). When teacher leaders are seeking to enter a leadership position, they generally need to complete graduate certification courses, and some districts require a residency program in which aspiring leaders shadow and are mentored or coached by current leaders (Daniëls, 2019; Hobson & Sharp, 2005; Jamison et al., 2020; Service et al., 2016).

This review of the literature reveals recommendations for building effective school leaders, and an effective school leader needs to provide a culture and climate that are conducive to teaching and learning while keeping student and staff safety at the forefront (Mendels, 2012; Rivera-McCutchen, 2021; Steele et al., 2021). Some schools are dealing with changing demographics (i.e., schools becoming more diverse) or simply a shift in the current generation's ideologies. Therefore, leaders need to be prepared to handle that, which is why being a culturally competent leader is so important in today's climate. Leading efficiently and effectively goes beyond operations and instruction (Barakat et al., 2021; Caliskan, 2020).

However, sound operational and instructional systems of management are essential. Teachers and leaders are encouraged to make data-driven decisions in all aspects. Instructionally, a leader needs to set the standard that students' progress should be monitored and analyzed consistently to inform academic decisions (DeJear Jr. et al., 2018). From an organizational

standpoint, data-driven decisions should also be made when concerning a school's campus. It is recommended for a leader to remember that a school is essentially a business. Therefore, each part of the day needs to be planned, and the financial ramifications need to be accounted for (Myende et al., 2018). Finally, family, parental engagement, and connection with the school's community is an essential part of leadership. Schools that provide a supportive learning environment ensure that students, staff, families, and the community feel that they are part of the culture and climate of the school. (Pushor & Amendt, 2018).

Chapter 3 describes the qualitative nature of the action research methodology that was used for this study. Data collection and analysis methods will be discussed, as well as interventions and limitations of the study.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **ACTION RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Teacher leaders interested in becoming educational leaders, specifically administrators, typically need to complete a graduate certificate program and sometimes a pipeline program in their district. In recent years, programs have worked to bridge the gap between teaching theory solely and providing practical application (Gates et al., 2020; Service et al., 2016). Districts that have cultivated and sustained principal and assistant principal pipeline programs have not just been able to focus on leader standards and preservice preparation but also on selective hiring and placement to ensure that successful aspiring leaders receive promotions at schools that are the best fit for them (Gates et al., 2020; Palmer et al., 2019).

Qualitative research was selected for this study as the first-person accounts of those involved were essential in helping to answer the research questions (Bloomberg, 2023). The action research process is collaborative, iterative, and cyclical (Glanz, 2014). The district where this study took place has not had a leadership pipeline program in recent years and needed school and district leaders to collaborate on the best way to bring such a program back. The benefits of a program like the one tested in the study were designed by a team that knew what skills were necessary to be an assistant principal in the district and, more specifically, to serve an underrepresented cluster of schools.

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to improve a leadership development program for aspiring assistant principals in an urban school cluster.

## **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What leadership behaviors do teachers in an aspiring leadership program identify as supportive in building their leadership capacity?
2. How did the aspiring leadership program participants describe the program's impact on their practice and understanding of leadership roles?
3. What did the action research team members learn through the process of implementing an aspiring leadership program?

## **Rationale for Qualitative Research Design**

School administrators significantly impact student success and school culture and climate. Steele et al. (2021) stated, "The question of how school systems should cultivate and develop strong leaders presents an important challenge" and questioned "how to prepare leaders with the skills to improve student outcomes in schools with low historic levels of achievement" (p. 223). Steele et al. (2021) discussed that most of the research conducted in recent years regarding school leadership pipeline programs focus on school principals and not "subordinate roles" (p. 249) or the role of assistant principal. A qualitative method was appropriate for this study because it focuses on a problem the schools face and allows one to act. Through qualitative research, the primary researcher works to collect and analyze the data through methods such as focus groups, questionnaires or surveys, and observations (Bloomberg, 2023).

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2013), "Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (p. 3). The Wallace Foundation has worked with many universities and school districts on developing their leadership programs, and in their research, it was realized

“that adults learn best when there are multiple opportunities to develop understandings over time and to question and expand frameworks and strategies” (para. 3, Woulfin, 2020). This lends itself well to action research's collaborative, reflective, and cyclical nature (Glanz, 2014).

### **Overview of Action Research Methods**

Action research is a qualitative research method focusing on solving problems in social systems. It pursues action to enhance procedures and examines the outcomes of the action shown (Bradbury et al., 2019). Action research became prevalent in the 1940s, and Kurt Lewin was instrumental in its popularity. Stephen Corey first introduced it into education in 1953 (Glanz, 2014).

Action research is a systematic investigation conducted by a school's established stakeholders to compile operations, teaching, or learning data. Action research differs from traditional research in two aspects. First, in conventional studies, the final objective is to generate results applied to a larger population. However, action research aims to enhance the quality or validity of local education (Merriam et al., 2016). Furthermore, participants in action research are frequently actively involved in the study; therefore, collaboration between the researcher and stakeholders is more substantial than in other approaches (Zepeda, 2019).

Action research assists with improvements school or district-wide if researchers take a more cooperative approach and work with other school or district stakeholders. In addition, action research may allow educators to make cognizant decisions and become more carefully involved in what is happening in their school buildings (Merriam et al., 2016). According to Glanz (2014), “Although originally developed primarily for professional development of teachers, action research has recently gained favor among administrators, supervisors, and other education leaders, and school-based management teams, including parents, community members,

and students, as a way of improving schools” (p. 16). Finally, self-study and self-reflection make professional development more tailored and significant. Moreover, through the process of self-study and self-reflection, educators can gain deeper insights into their teaching practices, leading to more personalized and impactful professional development experiences (Zepeda, 2019).

Figure 3.1 depicts the action research process in its cyclical nature. The researcher and the action research design team (ARDT) are in the middle of the circle to demonstrate their role in the process. They are also central to the reflection and collaboration that occurs between each step (Glanz, 2014).

**Figure 3.1**

*The Action Research Process*



*Note.* Adapted from Glanz (2014); Zepeda (2019)

### **Action Research Design**

The ARDT met biweekly throughout the study to work through the action research cycle of planning, doing, and monitoring (i.e., reviewing, refining, and reflecting) in a collaborative manner. Utilizing the action research model allowed the ARDT and the action research

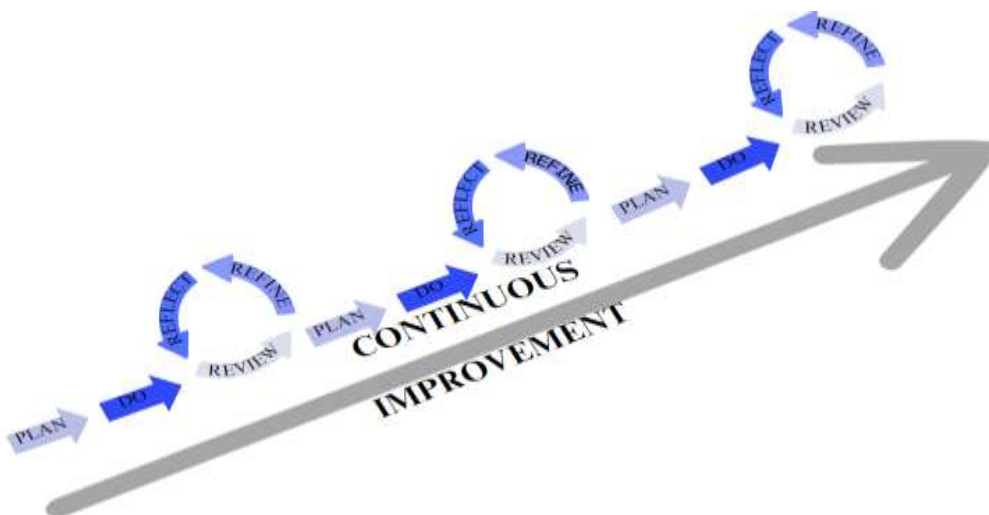
implementation team (ARIT) time to collaborate, reflect on the process, and make modifications as needed while keeping the problem of practice and research questions at the forefront.

### **The Spiraling and Iterative Nature of Action Research**

According to Bloomberg (2023), “action research is typically participatory and collaborative... [and] methods include observation, interview, and focus group” (p. 103). The process should be cyclical and iterative to repeat the steps multiple times (Bloomberg, 2023). Figure 3.2 depicts three cycles of the action research process utilizing the steps of plan, do, review, refine, and reflect. They are demonstrated in an upward motion as action research is about continuous improvement, and practice should get better over time with reflection and collaboration (Bloomberg, 2023; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

#### **Figure 3.2**

*The Spiraling Nature of Action Research*



*Note.* Adapted from the school district’s continuous improvement framework.

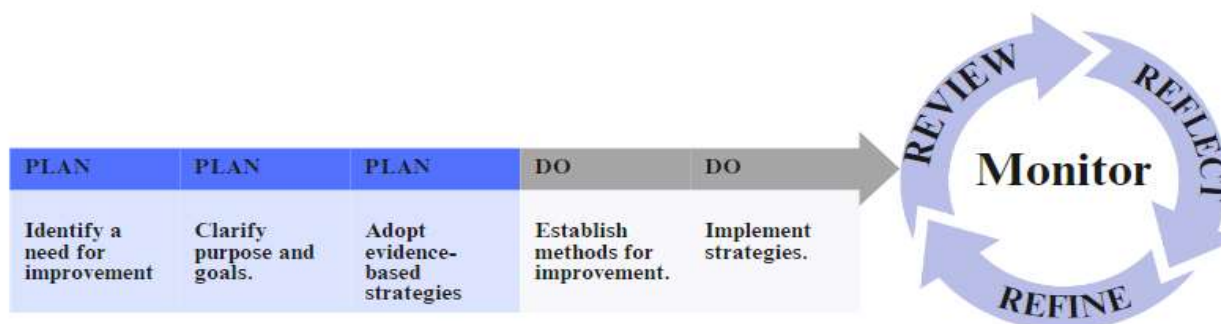
### **Logic Model**

For this study, the ARDT and the ARIT were active in a cyclical process adopted by the school district in which the study occurred aligned with Deming’s (1993) Plan-Do-Study-Act

(PDSA) cycle. Figure 3.3 has three planning stages, two doing stages, and then moves to three monitoring stages. The plan stages consist of identifying the need for improvement, clarifying purpose and goals, and adopting strategies. The do stages discuss establishing structures and implementing strategies. Meanwhile, the monitor stages allow time to review, reflect, and refine.

**Figure 3.3**

*Logic Model*



*Note.* Adapted from the school district's continuous improvement framework.

### Theory of Change

This action research study aimed to assist teachers who were aspiring assistant principals on their leadership journeys and to assist and prepare them for the next level. A study such as this was needed in the school district where this occurred. The district no longer had its own leadership pipeline program. They continued to have programs to assist leaders but no longer had programs for preparing aspiring leaders. Through the cyclical nature of the continuous improvement logic model, discussion occurred on whether professional learning sessions were enough to prepare aspiring leaders or if job-embedded preparation activities were also needed.

### The Case

With the absence of a current pipeline program for aspiring assistant principals in the district and especially the vastly different demographic makeup of the Southern Magnolia cluster

compared to the rest of the district, it was important for the primary researcher to guide this study. The ARDT helped provide a lens into what it takes to be an effective leader in this cluster and the district. The primary researcher worked with the ARIT (i.e., participants of the aspiring assistant principal program) to provide professional development sessions and coaching and mentoring opportunities.

According to Creswell (2013), a case study is a “qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system or multiple bounded systems over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving [observations, interviews], and reports a case description and case-based themes” (p. 97). This case study was conducted using interviews, observations, focus groups, and surveys to collect detailed and in-depth information from multiple sources (Creswell, 2013; Glanz, 2014). This was done collaboratively with the ARDT, ARIT, and other district school leaders. The collaboration and iteration of the cyclical nature of this action research case study allowed the ARIT to know what would be expected of them as leaders in the cluster and district.

### **Action Research Design Team**

To form the ARDT, the researcher selected school and district leaders who had a stake and an interest in creating a leadership pipeline in the Southern Magnolia cluster of the district. Table 3.1 shows the team members, along with their job titles, roles in the research, and years of experience. The years of experience they brought to the study were important to the researcher as it is apparent that they know what it takes to be an effective leader in the cluster and district. The primary researcher was promoted from assistant principal of Sweetbay Middle School to principal of one of the cluster’s elementary schools on October 2, 2023. This was during the second action research cycle.

**Table 3.1***Action Research Design Team Members*

| <b>Team Member</b>  | <b>Primary Role</b>                   | <b>Action Research Role</b>  |
|---------------------|---------------------------------------|--|
| Primary Researcher  | Principal                             | Worked with the ARDT to lead and conduct all research. Has five years as a school leader.  |
| Ms. Mary Palmer     | Regional Superintendent               | Provided expert knowledge of leading in the area. Knows what leadership capabilities are needed for the community. Has 23 years as a school and district leader. |
| Dr. Belinda Keller  | Regional Coordinator                  | Provided expert instructional and operational knowledge in leading the cluster schools. Has 20 years as a school and district leader.                            |
| Mr. Sean Albertson  | Secondary Principal                   | Provided expert knowledge on being a current school leader in the cluster. Has 19 years as a school leader.  |
| Ms. Kim Fountain    | Coordinator of Leadership Development | Provided expert knowledge of how the district develops aspiring school leaders. Has 16 years as a school and district leader.                                    |
| Ms. Danielle Potter | Elementary Principal                  | Provided expert knowledge on being a current school leader in the cluster. Has 20 years as a school leader.  |

### **Action Research Implementation Team**

During June and July 2023, select teacher leaders, at the recommendation of their principal, were asked to participate in the study and given a letter of consent to sign. The study took place between July and December 2023. The ARIT was comprised of six teacher leaders: two from the elementary school level, two from the middle school level, and two from the high school level. All schools were in the Southern Magnolia cluster of the large urban school district in the southeastern United States where the study occurred. Table 3.2 shows the list of teacher leader participants, their primary role, and their amount of teacher leader experience.

**Table 3.2**

*Action Research Implementation Team Members*

| <b>Team Member</b> | <b>Primary Role</b>  | <b>Teacher Leader Experience</b> |
|--------------------|--|----------------------------------|
| Mr. Matthew Allen  | 4 <sup>th</sup> Grade Teacher & Principal Advisory Council Member              | Provided 12 years of experience. |
| Ms. Maria Battle   | 2 <sup>nd</sup> Grade Teacher  | Provided 8 years of experience.  |
| Ms. Danielle Heard | 8 <sup>th</sup> Grade ELA/ESOL Teacher, School Webmaster, & Former Team Leader | Provided 6 years of experience.  |
| Mr. Kenneth Holmes | 6 <sup>th</sup> Grade ELA/ESOL Teacher & Former Team Leader                    | Provided 7 years of experience.  |
| Ms. Erin Love      | High School ELA Teacher & Digital Learning Team Facilitator                    | Provided 5 years of experience.  |
| Ms. Tracy Spears   | High School Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) Specialist                  | Provided 17 years of experience. |

### Action Research Plan and Timeline

According to Glanz (2014), as educational leaders, “we must first reflect on what needs to be accomplished and then take purposeful actions to enhance school improvement. Action research may be the very means to accomplish these objectives” (p. 217). Table 3.3 outlines the tasks the ARDT and ARIT will be involved in during the study and demonstrates the importance of collaboration and reflection as part of the action research cycles.

**Table 3.3**

*Action Research Timeline*

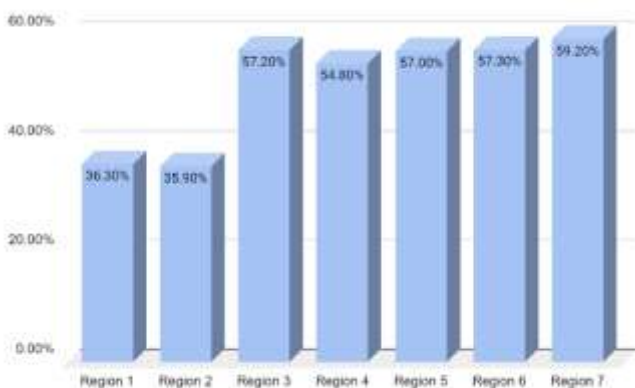
| Date              | ARDT Activities   | ARIT Activities  |
|-------------------|---|--|
| August<br>2023    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Received consent to participate in study</li> <li>• Held ARDT bi-monthly meetings</li> <li>• Held focus group</li> <li>• Collected and recorded data/reflections</li> <li>• Discussed reflections</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Received consent to participate in study</li> <li>• Intake Form/Application</li> <li>• Individual interviews #1</li> <li>• Professional development #1</li> <li>• Feedback questionnaire #1</li> <li>• Collected and recorded data/reflections</li> </ul> |
| September<br>2023 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Held ARDT bi-monthly meetings</li> <li>• Collected and recorded data</li> <li>• Discussed reflections</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Professional development #2</li> <li>• Feedback questionnaire #2</li> <li>• Mentor/Coaching meeting #1</li> <li>• Collected and recorded data/reflections</li> </ul>  |
| October<br>2023   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Held ARDT bi-monthly meetings</li> <li>• Collected and recorded data</li> <li>• Discussed reflections</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Professional development #3</li> <li>• Feedback questionnaire #3</li> <li>• Mentor/Coaching meeting #2</li> <li>• Collected and recorded data/reflections</li> </ul>  |
| November<br>2023  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Held ARDT bi-monthly meetings</li> <li>• Collected and recorded data</li> <li>• Discussed reflections</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Professional development #4</li> <li>• Feedback questionnaire #4</li> <li>• Individual interviews #2</li> <li>• Collected and recorded data/reflections</li> </ul>  |

## Context of the Study

The school district was established in the 1870s and is in an urban area in the southeastern United States. It is the third-largest school district in the state. “The district serves over 93,000 students, [has] 138 schools and centers, and 15,500 employees, including 6,600 teachers. Students and parents speak over 185 languages and represent over 155 nations” (*About the District*, 2022, para. 2). The district covers over 257 square miles throughout the county it serves, except for the areas zoned for two city school districts. The district’s superintendent leads seven regions. Each region has its own regional superintendent, and he or she has a cabinet that works in conjunction with the district’s cabinet members. During the 2021-2022 school year, there were 93,703 students; 51.2% were males, and 48.8% were females. The district is predominantly Black/African American, with 59% of the students identifying as such. The next largest race or ethnicity is Hispanic at 20%, then White/Caucasian, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Other at 11%, 6%, and 3%, respectively (State Department of Education, 2022).

### *Regional characteristics*

The demographic makeups of regions one and two differ greatly from the rest of the district. Regions one and two are by far the most racially and ethnically diverse. The number of languages spoken in those regions is also far greater. Throughout the district, nearly half, 48.2% of students, to be exact, are eligible for free or reduced lunch. Figure 3.4 displays the information for the 2021-2022 school year. The median household income in region 1 is \$87,446, and \$80,698 in region 2. In comparison, there is nearly a \$20,000 difference between the next closest region and a \$35,000 difference between the lowest median socio-economic status. Region 5’s median income is \$63,207, while region 3 and region 7 are \$59,286 and \$53,809, respectively. Finally, region 4’s is \$49,058, and \$46,361 for region 6 (School District).

**Figure 3.4***Percentage of Students Receiving Free or Reduced Lunch*

District-wide, there are 77 elementary schools (i.e., pre-Kindergarten – 5<sup>th</sup> grade), 19 middle schools (i.e., 6<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> grade), 22 high schools (i.e., 9<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> grade), 12 program schools (pre-Kindergarten – 12<sup>th</sup> grade), and 8 charter schools (Kindergarten – 12<sup>th</sup> grade). Region 1, where the study took place, is by far the largest student population, with 26 schools and 20,403 students. Seven thousand four hundred fifteen students in the region qualify for free or reduced lunch. There are 10,154 students in 17 different elementary schools, 4,063 students in three middle schools, and 5,488 students in three high schools. There is 1 program school with 65 students and two charter schools with 633 students (School District).

*Demographics of students in region one and Southern Magnolia cluster*

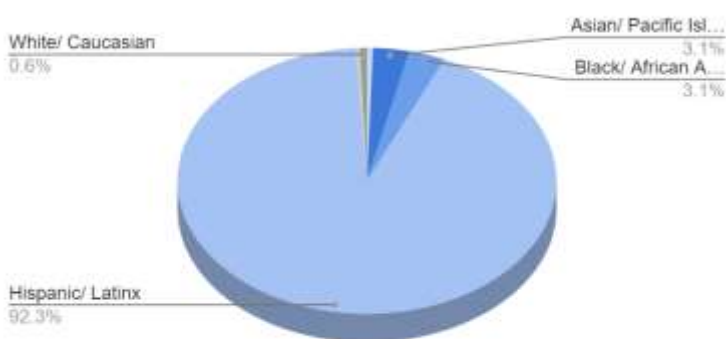
Region one is in the northern end of the county and is broken up into three clusters of schools. The Southern Magnolia cluster, where the study took place, is one of them. As region one is the largest in terms of the student population, it houses some of the largest schools in the district, including the largest middle school in the district: Sweetbay Middle School in the Southern Magnolia cluster. Sweetbay Middle School is the third-largest school in the district, making it more significant than many of the high schools, even though it only houses three grade levels. The demographic makeups of the two other clusters in region one are more similar than

that of the Southern Magnolia cluster. This trend follows their assessment scores and ratings as well.

Southern Magnolia consists of seven elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. The schools generally underperform academically and are high-need, with many economically disadvantaged students and families. The demographics of the cluster are found in Figure 3.5. In addition, 100% are identified as economically disadvantaged, 83.2% as ELLs, and 10.3% as SWDs (State Department of Education, 2022; State School Reports, 2022). Also, Spanish is spoken as a primary language in over 90% of the homes. The cluster spans what is known as the “international corridor” of the southeastern city.

**Figure 3.5**

*Demographics of the Southern Magnolia Cluster*



### **Cluster Performance**

The cluster scored an average of 64 on the College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI), and the high school has a graduation rate of 61.3. The schools are generally 4 stars on the school climate rating and 2.5 stars for financial efficacy (State Department of Education, 2019; State Department of Education, 2022). Out of the seven elementary schools, they outperformed the state on discipline data and being safe and substance-free and very closely

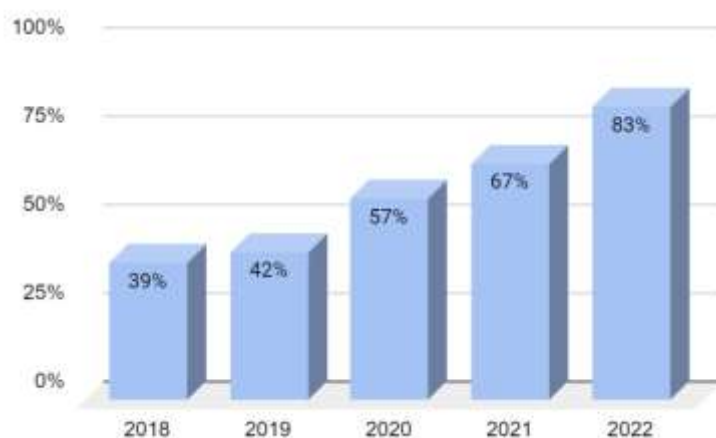
aligned with the state on attendance for students, teachers, other staff, and administrators, as well as for climate perception from students, parents, and personnel (*School Climate Overview*, 2022).

### **Focus on English Language Learners**

In recent years, the cluster has grown in terms of the student population as well as in the number of ELLs. At the same time, the student population in the district fell during the years of the COVID-19 pandemic. The student population in the cluster remained relatively steady. For example, at Sweetbay Middle School, the middle school that serves the cluster's seven elementary schools and one high school, the projection for the 2023-2024 school year is to have 85% of the students identified as active or monitored ELLs. This is an enormous increase from the 2016-2017 school year, in which only 37% of students received English as a Second or Other Language (ESOL) services. As seen in Figure 3.6 (Infinite Campus, n.d.), the percentage of ELLs steadily increased from that time forward.

**Figure 3.6**

*Percentage of English Language Learners in the Southern Magnolia Cluster*



The focus on ELLs is important to this study because it speaks to the cluster of schools in which teacher leaders who are aspiring leaders serve. In the past, when there was a more formal

pipeline program, it focused on leading in the district as a whole, not in a school where virtually all students are or were ELLs and where families speak languages other than English.

The Southern Magnolia cluster considered the goal areas of the district's 2019-2024 Strategic Plan to create its PL plan for the 2023-2024 school year. It leaned a bit more heavily on the core beliefs for centering their thinking: "making sure every decision supports quality teaching and learning," "ensuring we meet every student's academic, social, and emotional needs," "embracing the cultural diversity of our community as a strength," and "holding everyone accountable for educational excellence." Due to the demographics of the cluster, the focus is on the needs of ELLs in the varying formats in which they receive instruction but primarily on how to use data to the advantage of instructional staff and how to instruct ELLs across content areas (*Strategic Plan, 2022*).

For the 2023-2024 school year, the cluster will rely predominantly on teacher leader experts to provide PD sessions to those at their schools and others in the cluster. The intention is to have teacher leaders from varying grade levels, and content areas demonstrate that these skills can be used in any classroom and that some of these skills are simply best practices for all learners, not solely ELLs. However, the focus is on the array of instructional methods and differentiation for ELLs of varying proficiency levels in the same classroom and how to use data to provide that instruction (district employee, personal communication, January 10, 2023).

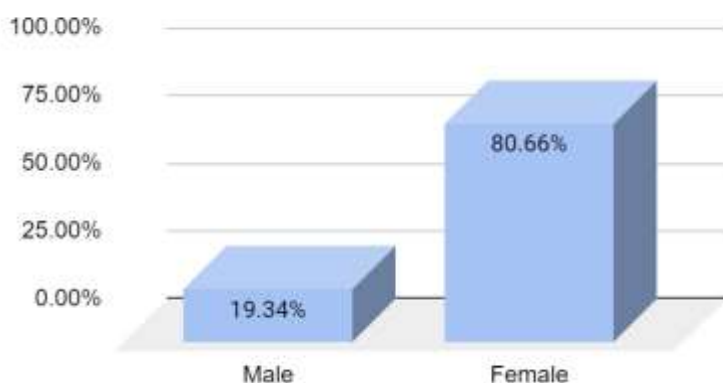
### **Demographics of Teachers**

There were 579 certified teachers in the Southern Magnolia cluster during the 2021-2022 school year, only one percent of which were certified under provisional status. The middle school had the most teachers at 125. This was 16 more than the high school due to its enrollment. The demographics of teacher gender are reflected in Figure 3.7. Not surprisingly, the majority of

teachers were female. As demonstrated by Figure 3.8, the racial and ethnic demographics of the teachers, however, are vastly different than that of the student population, with the majority of teachers being Black or African American (*Report Card, 2022*).

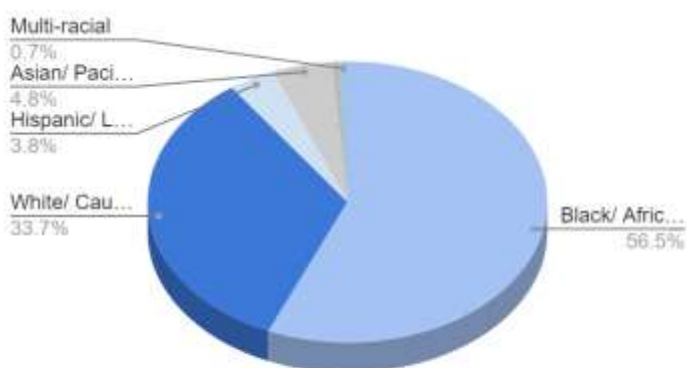
**Figure 3.7**

*Teachers' Gender Percentages*



**Figure 3.8**

*Teachers' Racial and Ethnic Percentages*

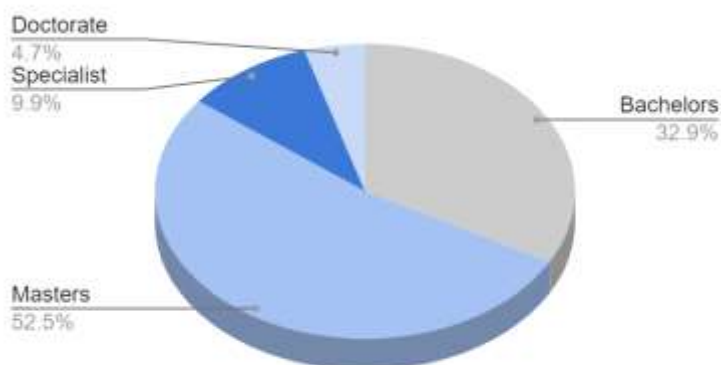


The majority of the teachers in the cluster have graduate degrees in the field of education, as seen in Figure 3.9, just as the majority are veteran teachers with an average of 13 years of experience in the classroom, as demonstrated by Figure 3.10 (*Report Card, 2022*). With those years of

experience and advanced degrees, around 15% of teachers at the cluster schools are considered teacher leaders (cluster administrators, personal communication, 2023; *What does it mean...*, 2021).

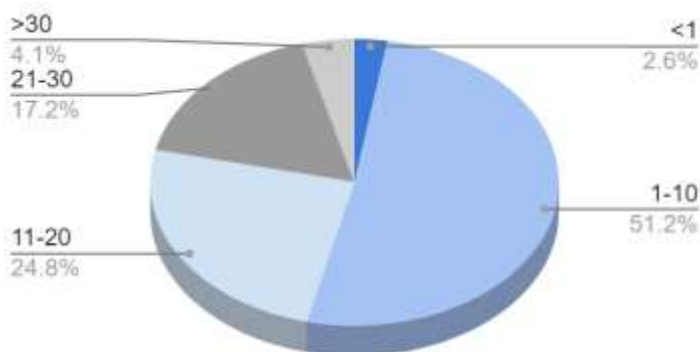
**Figure 3.9**

*Degrees in Education Held by Teachers*



**Figure 3.10**

*Teachers' Years of Experience in the Classroom*



### Data Sources

Changes in district leadership and the COVID-19 pandemic caused a lapse in district support for aspiring assistant principals, including the utilization of a pipeline program. The

previous program focused on general leadership capabilities and necessities, not how to be an effective leader with a certain demographic. The demographics are vastly different in the Southern Magnolia cluster compared to the district (i.e., large Hispanic and international populations). This, coupled with the lack of a preparatory program, led to the importance of developing a program for this cluster. The purpose of this study was to improve a leadership development program for aspiring assistant principals in an urban school cluster.

### **Participants and Selection Criteria**

The participants in the study included two elementary schools, two middle schools, and two high school teacher leaders from the Southern Magnolia cluster of the third largest urban school district in a state in the southeastern United States. There were four females and two males. The teacher leaders were all aspiring to positions as assistant principals soon. They all had at least three years of classroom teaching experience and at least some leadership or coaching experience (i.e., team leader, content leader, department chair, academic coach). In addition, they all had at least a master's degree in education and a recommendation from their current supervisor (i.e., principal or assistant principal). Throughout the study, teachers were leaders in high-needs, Title I schools with students who predominantly speak Spanish at home.

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), "purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (p. 96). The type of selection used in this study is a combination of typical and chain sampling. Recruitment was sent via email to the schools in the cluster. Then the six participants (i.e., two for elementary, two for middle, and two for high school) were selected based on the information collected and whether they met the

requirements. Some participants enabled the snowball or chain strategy as they referred to other potential participants (Bloomberg, 2023; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The following criteria were considered to select participants: at least three years of classroom teaching experience in the Southern Magnolia cluster; had some supervisory or leadership experience; a master's degree in education; and a recommendation from their current principal or assistant principal. These requirements align with what is necessary to apply for an assistant principal's job in the district.

### **Data Collection Methods**

A qualitative action research approach with collaboration and reflection was utilized in this study. Incorporating individual interviews, focus groups, observations, a researcher's journal, and questionnaires were essential and aligned with the theoretical framework and research questions regarding building capacity in aspiring assistant principals (Creswell, 2013).

Individual interviews were conducted with aspiring assistant principals in elementary, middle, and high school settings (i.e., participants or ARIT) at the beginning and end of the study. A focus group was conducted at the beginning of the study with the ARDT and additional school and district leaders who have school-building level administration experience.

Observations were conducted throughout the three action research cycles of the ARIT members in mentoring and coaching sessions with current administrators. After professional development sessions, monthly electronic questionnaires were sent out to ask, "What has been learned so far?" and "What support is still needed?" Finally, the researcher kept a journal throughout the study in which she took notes of meetings with the action research teams and observations conducted of the aspiring leaders in action and made suggestions for modifications in the study. The iterative nature of action research lent itself well to using the researcher's journal.

## Interviews

According to Seidman (2019), interviewing “is not to test hypotheses, and not to evaluate... [it is] ... understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning... of that experience... interviewing research is an interest in other individuals’ stories because they are of worth” (p. 9). Interviewing in research can be very structured or more open-ended. This study focused on phenomenological interviewing using primarily open-ended questions (Seidman, 2019). “The goal is to have participants reconstruct their experience within the topic under study” (Seidman, 2019, p. 14).

Table 3.4 shows the interview questions that were asked at the initial interview as well as their alignment with research questions.

**Table 3.4**

*Initial Interview Questions Aligned to Research Questions*

| <b>Question Number</b> | <b>Interview Question</b>  | <b>Research Question Alignment</b> |
|------------------------|--|------------------------------------|
| 1                      | What do you believe will be helpful in supporting your leadership journey?                               | RQ1                                |
| 2                      | What does instructional leadership look like to you and what experience do you have?                     | RQ2                                |
| 3                      | What does operational leadership look like to you and what experience do you have?                       | RQ2                                |
| 4                      | What does leadership related to stakeholder engagement look like to you and what experience do you have? | RQ2                                |
| 5                      | How will you determine if the program has had an impact on your leadership capabilities?                 | RQ2                                |
| 6                      | What do you believe you will learn throughout the implementation of this program?                        | RQ3                                |

Table 3.5 shows the interview questions that were asked in the final individual interview as well as which research question they aligned to. The questions are similar when comparing the two interview sessions but vary slightly to signify the time that has passed in the study and perspectives or knowledge that may have shifted or changed. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

**Table 3.5**

*Final Interview Questions Aligned to Research Questions*

| <b>Question Number</b> | <b>Interview Questions</b>   | <b>Research Question Alignment</b> |
|------------------------|--|------------------------------------|
| 1                      | What was helpful in supporting your leadership journey?  | RQ1                                |
| 2                      | What does instructional leadership look like to you and what experience do you have?                     | RQ2                                |
| 3                      | What does operational leadership look like to you and what experience do you have?                       | RQ2                                |
| 4                      | What does leadership related to stakeholder engagement look like to you and what experience do you have? | RQ2                                |
| 5                      | Describe the program's impact on your leadership capabilities.   | RQ2                                |
| 6                      | What did you learn throughout the implementation of this program?  | RQ3                                |

### **Focus Groups**

A focus group, or group interview, was used for this research study at the beginning with administrators from the district and those on the ARDT (Bloomberg, 2023; Glanz, 2014).

According to Hennick (2014, as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016):

Perhaps the most unique characteristic of focus group research is the interactive

discussion through which data are generated, which leads to a different type of data not accessible through individual interviews. During the group discussion participants share their views, hear the views of others, and perhaps refine their own views in light of what they have heard (p. 2).

The participants were experts on the topic of being an administrator (i.e., assistant principal) in the district. They had a wealth of knowledge on what one should know before applying to a position (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The participants were relaxed and comfortable answering questions such as those seen in Table 3.6 on the themes of support for an aspiring assistant principal, the program's impact, skills needed to become an administrator in the district, and the program's implementation (Bloomberg, 2023).

**Table 3.6**

*Focus Group Guiding Questions Aligned to Research Questions*

| <b>Theme</b>             | <b>Question Number</b> | <b>Focus Group Guiding Questions</b>   | <b>Research Question Alignment</b> |
|--------------------------|------------------------|--|------------------------------------|
| Support                  | 1                      | What is the best way to support an aspiring assistant principal?                               | RQ1                                |
| Support                  | 2                      | What barriers are there to supporting aspiring assistant principals?                           | RQ1                                |
| Support                  | 3                      | How have you supported aspiring assistant principals?  | RQ1                                |
| Skills needed            | 4                      | What leadership skills do you believe are needed to be an assistant principal in the district? | RQ2                                |
| Program's impact         | 5                      | What type of impact would you like the program to have?  | RQ2, RQ3                           |
| Program's implementation | 6                      | What are you hoping to learn throughout the implementation of this program?                    | RQ3                                |

## Observation Notes

This study used observation as a method of qualitative data collection. According to Bloomberg (2023):

Participant observation is a central and fundamental method in qualitative inquiry and is used to discover and explain complex interactions in natural social settings... through this type of open-ended entry, the researcher is potentially able to discover recurring patterns of behavior, interactions, and relationships (p. 288).

Observations were conducted of the aspiring assistant principals while they were gaining experience in leadership capacities (i.e., shadowing or leading a project) and during mentoring and coaching sessions with current school-level administrators in the district. During the mentoring and coaching sessions, observations were recorded and listened to again later to add to or modify notes when applicable. Table 3.7 details some of the notes taken during observations of ARIT members delivering their instructional professional learning sessions for the intervention in the second action research cycle. Observations helped the researcher to be accountable to the ARDT and ARIT. The notes assisted with keeping track of what was occurring throughout the observations. As the primary researcher was present during the second intervention, one needs to be mindful of the possible observer effect, as discussed by Bogdan & Knopp Biklen (2016). Also called the Heisenberg effect, “the presence of the researcher [can] change the behavior of the people he or she is trying to study” (p. 36). This observation comes from “Heisenberg’s discovery that the heat of the electron microscope causes the electrons to move faster than they would if they were not under the microscope (p. 36). This means the primary researcher’s presence during the sessions could have impacted how the ARIT members reacted when presenting and how the teacher-learners acted.

**Table 3.7***Sample Observation Notes from Intervention 2*

| <b>ARIT Member</b>     | <b>Date and Time</b>         | <b>Highlights of Observations</b>  |
|------------------------|------------------------------|--|
| Ms. Love               | October 6, 2023<br>– 8:00am  | Teachers appreciated the time to learn and collaborate with one another. It was mentioned that actually being able “to work on a workday” was appreciated. |
| Mr. Holmes & Ms. Heard | October 6, 2023<br>– 9:15am  | Ms. Heard appeared to be the leader of the pair. She presented, while Mr. Holmes observed and assisted teachers.   |
| Ms. Spears             | October 6, 2023<br>– 10:00am | It was apparent that Ms. Spears had presented this topic before. It may have been more beneficial to do something new to keep participants more engaged.   |
| Ms. Battle             | October 6, 2023<br>– 11:30am | Teacher participants seemed to lose some interest during transitions between tasks.  |
| Mr. Allen              | October 6, 2023<br>– 1:00pm  | The student work samples provided seemed to be the highlight. Mr. Allen seemed very comfortable presenting.  |

**Researcher’s Journal**

Because the action research process is cyclical and reflective, the necessity of a researcher’s journal was apparent. While the note-taking process from the observation notes and the researcher’s journal may be similar, the products are vastly different. Meeting minutes from each meeting with the ARDT were recorded in the journal, as well as the researcher’s thoughts and reflections on how the cycles were progressing and what modifications should be made. This reflection was also important for content analysis and field notes. “Reflective comments can include the researcher’s feelings, reactions, hunches, initial interpretations, speculations, and working hypotheses” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 151). Table 3.8 displays excerpts from the researcher’s journal.

**Table 3.8**

*Excerpts from the Researcher's Journal from Action Research Cycle 3*

| <b>Activity</b>                  | <b>Date</b>       | <b>Journal Entry Sample</b>  |
|----------------------------------|-------------------|--|
| Current Challenges               | October 16, 2023  | The ARIT discussed challenges faced, like the language barrier, in their schools.  |
| Potential Impact of Intervention | October 30, 2023  | High School teachers discussed being able to have an impact on attendance and graduation rate, if parents were more engaged. |
| Observation of Intervention      | November 27, 2023 | Ms. Spears delivered a learning session to parents about how to help students with homework.                                 |

### **Artifacts**

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), “In judging the value of a data source, a researcher can ask whether it contains information or insights relevant to the research question and whether it can be acquired in a reasonably practical yet systemic manner” (p. 180). If it can, then the researcher should utilize the source. Artifacts can be primary or secondary sources, and the researcher needs to be aware of the validity of the source (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this study, Figure B1, the reference sheet of leader standards, was used as an artifact. Other documents that were used were created throughout the cycles by the ARDT.

### **Interventions**

As Glanz (2014) stated, “A treatment, also known as an intervention, is a specific instructional practice, program, or procedure that a researcher implements to investigate its effect on the behavior or achievement of an individual or group” (p. 64). This study aimed to build leadership capacity in aspiring assistant principals, and each cycle focused on essential leadership skills (i.e., operations, instruction, and parent and family engagement) to properly answer the research questions. The goal of each action research cycle was to design and

implement an aspiring assistant principal pipeline program in which the ARIT (i.e., participants) were provided an opportunity for real-world administrative experience that they could add to their resumes or speak to in an interview.

This cyclical research allowed for three interventions (i.e., one in each cycle). The interventions in this study can be seen in Table 3.9. They are broken up into three themes or facets of leadership, as each cycle will focus on a different one. The first intervention will provide immediate results, while the two that follow will be able to be observed throughout the planning and implementation stages. Finally, all members of the ARIT will receive feedback, and the ARDT will collaborate and reflect regularly to see if modifications need to be made.

**Table 3.9**

*Interventions per Action Research Cycle*

| Cycle | Intervention Theme           | Interventions                 | Monitoring Strategies   |
|-------|------------------------------|-------------------------------|---|
| 1     | Operational Leadership       | Participate in a simulation   | Observations and feedback, followed by collaborative reflection with ARDT |
| 2     | Instructional Leadership     | Lead professional development | Observations and feedback, followed by collaborative reflection with ARDT |
| 3     | Parent and Family Engagement | Lead an initiative            | Observations and feedback, followed by collaborative reflection with ARDT |

### **Data Analysis Methods**

According to Bloomberg (2023), “the data analysis and interpretation process needs to be accurate and clearly understandable for all stakeholders to gain their input regarding identifying and supporting possible solutions to the problems that are being researched” (p. 169). With action research being iterative, collaborative, and cyclical, the data analysis step is meant to generate understanding and inform future actions. Moreover, transparent data analysis fosters stakeholder trust and informs effective decision-making in action research.

## Coding

Coding is necessary in qualitative research to organize the wealth of text or informative data that is collected. It is a way to understand, label, handle, and order the data (Bloomberg, 2023). Elliott (2018) denotes the need for coding as:

Text data are dense data, and it takes a long time to go through them and make sense of them. Coding is a way of doing this, of essentially indexing or mapping data, to provide an overview of disparate data that allows the researcher to make sense of them in relation to their research questions. Most simply, it can be a way of tagging data that are relevant to a particular point (p. 2851).

Coding is essentially a way to tag data with letters, numbers, colors, or symbols and develop a key to keep track of it so that when it is reviewed later, it is not as cumbersome (Bloomberg, 2023; Glanz, 2014). Bloomberg (2023) highlights some reasons to use coding in qualitative research:

- Encourage deeper analysis of collected data.
- Analyze coded segments to uncover underlying meanings.
- Group similar data into categories or themes.
- Explore connections between categories and other concepts.
- Refine categories based on additional dimensions found in the data.
- Compare and combine categories.
- Move from concrete data to more abstract themes and theories.
- Compare interpretations of data by different researchers. (p. 345).

Deductive coding, followed by inductive coding, was used in this research. The researcher started with pre-existing codes, then dug deeper, creating a more refined set of codes reflecting

on the data and creating meaningful ones as the analysis progressed (Saldaña, 2021). While inductive and deductive coding were utilized in this study, Table 3.10 indicates a sample of deductive coding used.

**Table 3.10**

*Code Sampling for Data*

| <b>Code</b> | <b>Meaning</b>               | <b>Data Sample</b>   |
|-------------|------------------------------|--|
| S           | Support                      | “I hope that the meetings feel supportive and are safe places to share thoughts and feelings.” – Mr. Holmes discussing how he wants meetings to be in his initial interview  |
| T           | Time                         | “Extra time needed to ensure that any tasks provided to the aspiring AP are done correctly or accurately.” – Ms. Palmer speaking about a barrier faced with supporting aspiring Aps  |
| OL          | Operational Leadership       | “I believe it is anything that happens outside of the classroom that helps a school run daily.” – Ms. Battle speaking about operational tasks in an interview  |
| IL          | Instructional Leadership     | “To me, instructional leadership is about helping educators stay abreast of current trends in education, supporting faculty in obtaining classroom resources, testing and scheduling.” – Ms. Heard sharing her thoughts in the initial interview |
| PFE         | Parent and Family Engagement | “I am currently a part of the PAC and help plan monthly parent meetings for Title 1.” – Ms. Spears discussing her experiences with parental engagement before the beginning of the program   |

### **Thematic Analysis**

Thematic analysis has six phases, as seen in Table 3.11. There has been discussion about whether thematic analysis should be considered a method separate from qualitative analysis.

However, many agree that it is just a series of steps that guides researchers of qualitative studies

when analyzing data. The benefits of using thematic analysis include its accessibility to researchers in summarizing large amounts of data (Nowell et al., 2017).

**Table 3.11**

*Phases of Thematic Analysis and Establishing Trustworthiness*

| Phases of Thematic Analysis                   | Means of Establishing Trustworthiness  |
|---|--|
| Phase 1: Familiarizing yourself with the data | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prolong engagement with data</li> <li>• Triangulate different data and collection modes</li> <li>• Document theoretical and reflective thoughts</li> <li>• Document thoughts about potential codes/themes</li> <li>• Store raw data in well-organized archives</li> <li>• Keep records of all data field notes, transcripts, and reflective journals</li> </ul> |
| Phase 2: Generating initial codes             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Peer debriefing</li> <li>• Researcher triangulation</li> <li>• Reflexive journaling</li> </ul>  |
| Phase 3: Searching for themes                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Researcher triangulation</li> <li>• Diagramming to make sense of theme connections</li> <li>• Keep detailed notes about development of concepts and themes</li> </ul>   |
| Phase 4: Reviewing themes                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Researcher triangulation</li> <li>• Themes and subthemes vetted by team members</li> <li>• Test for referential adequacy by returning to raw data</li> </ul>  |
| Phase 5: Defining and naming themes           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Researcher triangulation</li> <li>• Peer debriefing</li> <li>• Team consensus on themes</li> </ul>  |
| Phase 6: Producing the report                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Member checking</li> <li>• Peer debriefing</li> <li>• Describing process of coding and analysis in sufficient detail</li> </ul>   |

*Note.* Adapted from Nowell et al., 2017.

This form of analysis includes multiple steps where the researcher enacts triangulation (Nowell et al., 2017). Bloomberg (2023) describes triangulation as a “powerful way of enhancing the

quality of the research, particularly credibility. It is based on the idea of convergence of multiple perspectives for mutual confirmation of data to ensure that all aspects of a phenomenon have been thoroughly explored (p. 277).

### **Reliability, Validity, and Generalizability**

Regarding reliability, validity, and generalizability, Lincoln and Guba (1986) stated, “These... criteria, when fulfilled, obviate problems of confounding, atypically, instability, and bias, respectively, and they do so... by the techniques of controlling or randomizing possible sources of confounding, representative sampling, replication, and insulation of the investigator” (p. 74). The term validity can be looked at differently when referring to a qualitative study. The researcher generally does not look at data like test scores but interacts with the participants and uses their views and feedback on the theme of the study (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Leung, 2015).

The “generalizability of one study to another is judged by similarities between the time, place, people, and other social contexts” (Leung, 2015, p. 326). Generalizability correlates to transferability in that generalizability discovers whether the findings of a study can represent not only a small sample but also a larger population. In contrast, transferability denotes if the findings of one context can be transferred to another similar context. Lastly, reliability is similar to dependability, consistency, and accuracy. Researchers need to ensure that their data is trustworthy. This can be done through the process of triangulation (Leung, 2015). According to Creswell and Miller (2000), “triangulation is a validity procedure where researchers search for convergence among multiple and different sources of information to form themes or categories in a study” (p. 126). Triangulation enhances the credibility and robustness of research findings by corroborating evidence from various sources and methods (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The

triangulation of research methods used in this study can be seen in Table 3.12 as they relate to the research questions.

**Table 3.12**

*Triangulation of Research Methods*

| Research Questions   | Methods of Data Collection  | Methods of Data Analysis   |
|--|---|--|
| RQ1: What leadership behaviors do teachers in an aspiring leadership program identify as supportive in building their leadership capacity?       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One-on-one interview</li> <li>• Feedback questionnaire</li> <li>• Researcher's journal</li> </ul>                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coding</li> <li>• Reflection</li> </ul> |
| RQ2: How did the aspiring leadership program participants describe the program's impact on their practice and understanding of leadership roles? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One-on-one interview</li> <li>• Document analysis</li> <li>• Observations</li> <li>• Researcher's journal</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coding</li> <li>• Reflection</li> </ul> |
| RQ3: What did the action research team members learn through the process of implementing an aspiring leadership program?                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus group</li> <li>• Feedback questionnaire</li> <li>• Researcher's journal</li> </ul>                             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coding</li> <li>• Reflection</li> </ul> |

### Subjectivity Statement

At the start of the research, the primary researcher had spent over five years as an assistant principal in the Southern Magnolia cluster at Sweetbay Middle School. Near the mid-point of the action research cycles, the researcher was promoted to principal at one of the elementary schools in the cluster. This was the only administrative experience that the researcher had. It was essential to the researcher to build leadership capacity in aspiring leaders to serve that generally underserved community. Of equal importance was assisting teacher leaders in learning what skills were needed to serve at the school leader level. Although the researcher had a wealth

of teacher leader experience, when she was promoted to assistant principal, she knew that not every person looking to move to the next level has been allowed time and opportunity to grow. The researcher also speaks Spanish, which is spoken by over 90% of the students and families in the urban cluster of schools, and was a Spanish and ESOL teacher before becoming an administrator. This knowledge of the language and Hispanic/Latinx cultures, as well as the struggles of an ELL, gives her a unique lens into the lives of many of the families and allows her to connect with them more easily than a solely English speaker.

### **Limitations**

This study had several limitations, including the small sample size, the selected cluster's demographics, and the short data collection span (i.e., July 25, 2023 – December 1, 2023). The small number of participants allowed the action research cycles to be completed with fidelity during the semester-long data collection period. The cluster demographics were important to the study's context. However, these limitations (i.e., the small number of participants and the very specific demographics of the students served) may have decreased the chances of transferability of the research.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter outlined the research design and methodology of this action research study on building capacity in aspiring assistant principals. This study utilized one-on-one interviews, focus groups, observations, and questionnaires to help aspiring assistant principals gain leadership experience and explore the implementation of a pipeline program. The following chapter looks at the findings from the action research case and how they tie into the research questions.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **FINDINGS FROM THE ACTION RESEARCH CASE**

The needs of an aspiring assistant principal are vast, and one needs to be willing to put in the necessary work to build his or her leadership toolbelt. As stated by Donlan (2022) regarding assistant principals, “While particular duties can vary widely from one school or grade level to another, commonalities exist, such as working hand in hand with principals to ensure staff and students are in alignment with the goals... in the learning community” (p. 8).

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to improve a leadership development program for aspiring assistant principals in an urban school cluster.

#### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What leadership behaviors do teachers in an aspiring leadership program identify as supportive in building their leadership capacity?
2. How did the aspiring leadership program participants describe the program’s impact on their practice and understanding of leadership roles?
3. What did the action research team members learn through the process of implementing an aspiring leadership program?

#### **Context of the Study**

The school district was established in the 1870s and is in an urban area in the southeastern United States. It is the third-largest school district in the state. “The district serves

over 93,000 students, [has] 138 schools and centers, and 15,500 employees, including 6,600 teachers. Students and parents speak over 185 languages and represent over 155 nations” (*About the District*, 2022, para. 2). The district covers over 257 square miles throughout the county it serves, except for the areas zoned for two city school districts. The district’s superintendent leads seven regions. Each region has its own regional superintendent, and he or she has his or her cabinet that works in conjunction with the district’s cabinet members. During the 2021-2022 school year, there were 93,703 students; 51.2% were males, and 48.8% were females. The district is predominantly Black/African American, with 59% of the students identifying as such. The next largest race or ethnicity is Hispanic at 20%, then White/Caucasian, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Other at 11%, 6%, and 3%, respectively (State Department of Education, 2022).

### **Regional Characteristics**

The demographic makeups of regions one and two differ greatly from the rest of the district. Regions one and two are by far the most racially and ethnically diverse. The number of languages spoken in those regions is also far greater. Throughout the district, nearly half, 48.2% of students, to be exact, are eligible for free or reduced lunch. The median household income in region 1 is \$87,446, and \$80,698 in region 2. In comparison, there is nearly a \$20,000 difference between the next closest region and a \$35,000 difference between the lowest median socio-economic status. Region 5’s median income is \$63,207, while region 3 and region 7 are \$59,286 and \$53,809, respectively. Finally, region 4’s is \$49,058, and \$46,361 for region 6 (School District).

District-wide, there are 77 elementary schools (i.e., pre-K – 5<sup>th</sup> grade), 19 middle schools (i.e., 6<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> grade), 22 high schools (i.e., 9<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> grade), 12 program schools (pre-K – 12<sup>th</sup> grade), and 8 charter schools (K – 12<sup>th</sup> grade). Region 1, where the study took place, is by far the

largest student population, with 26 schools and 20,403 students. In the region, 7,415 students qualify for free or reduced lunch. There are 10,154 students in 17 different elementary schools, 4,063 students in three middle schools, and 5,488 students in three high schools. There is 1 program school with 65 students and two charter schools with 633 students (School District).

### **Demographics of Students in Region One and Southern Magnolia Cluster**

Region one is in the northern end of the county and is broken up into three clusters of schools. The Southern Magnolia cluster is one of them. As region one is the largest in terms of the student population, it houses some of the largest schools in the district, including the largest middle school in the district: Sweetbay Middle School in the Southern Magnolia cluster. Sweetbay Middle School is the third-largest school in the district, making it more significant than many of the high schools, even though it only houses three grade levels. The demographic makeups of the two other clusters, in region one, are more similar than that of the Southern Magnolia cluster. This trend follows their assessment scores and ratings as well.

Southern Magnolia consists of seven elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. The schools generally underperform academically and are high-need schools, with a large percentage of economically disadvantaged students and families. Over 92% are considered Hispanic/Latinx, 100% are identified as economically disadvantaged, 83.2% as ELLs, and 10.3% as SWDs (State Department of Education, 2022; State School Reports, 2022). Also, Spanish is spoken, as a primary language, in over 90% of the homes. The cluster spans what is known as the “international corridor” of the southeastern city.

### **Cluster Performance**

The cluster scored an average of 64 on the College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI), and the high school has a graduation rate of 61.3. The schools are generally 4 stars on

the school climate rating and 2.5-stars for financial efficacy (State Department of Education, 2019; State Department of Education, 2022). Out of the seven elementary schools, they outperformed the state on discipline data and being safe and substance-free and very closely aligned with the state on attendance for students, teachers, other staff, and administrators, as well as for climate perception from students, parents, and personnel (*School Climate Overview*, 2022).

### **Focus on English Language Learners**

In recent years the cluster has grown in terms of the student population as well as in the number of ELLs. At the same time, the student population in the district fell during the years of the COVID-19 pandemic. The student population in the cluster remained relatively steady. For example, at Sweetbay Middle School, the middle school that serves the cluster's seven elementary schools and one high school, the projection for the 2023-2024 school year is to have 85% of the students identified as active or monitored ELLs. This is an enormous increase from the 2016-2017 school year, in which only 37% of students received English as a Second or Other Language (ESOL) services. The percentage of ELLs steadily increased from that time forward to about 83% at the time of the study.

The focus on ELLs is important to this study because it speaks to the cluster of schools in which teacher leaders who are aspiring leaders serve. In the past, when there was a more formal pipeline program it focused on leading in the district as a whole, not in a school where virtually all students are or were ELLs and where families speak languages other than English.

The Southern Magnolia cluster considered the goal areas of the district's 2019-2024 Strategic Plan to create its PL plan for the 2023-2024 school year. It leaned a bit more heavily on the core beliefs for centering their thinking: "making sure every decision supports quality teaching and learning," "ensuring we meet every student's academic, social, and emotional

needs,” “embracing the cultural diversity of our community as a strength,” and “holding everyone accountable for educational excellence.” Due to the demographics of the cluster, the focus is on the needs of ELLs in the varying formats in which they receive instruction but primarily on how to use data to the advantage of instructional staff and how to instruct ELLs across content areas (*Strategic Plan, 2022*).

For the 2023-2024 school year, the cluster will rely predominantly on teacher leader experts to provide PD sessions to those at their schools and others in the cluster. The intention is to have teacher leaders from varying grade levels and content areas demonstrate that these skills can be used in any classroom and that some of these skills are simply best practices for all learners, not solely ELLs. However, the focus is on the array of instructional methods and differentiation for ELLs of varying proficiency levels in the same classroom and how to use data to provide that instruction (district employee, personal communication, January 10, 2023).

### **Demographics of Teachers**

There were 579 certified teachers in the Southern Magnolia cluster during the 2021-2022 school year, only one percent of which were certified under provisional status. The middle school had the most teachers at 125. This was 16 more than the high school due to its enrollment. Not surprisingly, the majority of teachers were female. The racial and ethnic demographics of the teachers, however, are vastly different than that of the student population, with the majority of teachers being Black or African American (*Report Card, 2022*).

The majority of the teachers in the cluster have graduate degrees in a field of education, just as the majority are veteran teachers with an average of 13 years of experience in the classroom (*Report Card, 2022*). With those years of experience and advanced degrees, around

15% of teachers at the cluster schools are considered teacher leaders (cluster administrators, personal communication, 2023; *What does it mean...*, 2021).

### **Action Research Implementation Team**

The study participants were selected based on their leadership aspirations (i.e., to be an assistant principal) and their principal's recommendation. They all had varying leadership knowledge and certifications but were described as teacher leaders. Table 4.1 shows the certifications held by each member of the ARIT. The researcher felt that it was essential to know the certifications held by the participants to give a lens into their way of thinking.

**Table 4.1**

*Action Research Implementation Team Members' Certifications*

| <b>Team Member</b> | <b>Teaching Certifications</b>                                    | <b>Leadership Certification</b>          |
|--------------------|---|--|
| Mr. Matthew Allen  | Elementary Education (P-5)  | Teacher Leadership, Coaching Endorsement |
| Ms. Maria Battle   | Elementary Education (P-5), ESOL Endorsement, Science Endorsement | Teacher Support & Coaching Endorsement   |
| Ms. Danielle Heard | English (6-12), ESOL (P-12), Gifted Endorsement                   | None                                     |
| Mr. Kenneth Holmes | Middle Grades Language Arts (4-8), ESOL (P-12)                    | Teacher Leadership                       |
| Ms. Erin Love      | English (6-12), ESOL (P-12)                                       | None                                     |
| Ms. Tracy Spears   | History (6-12), ESOL Endorsement, Gifted Endorsement              | None                                     |

Mr. Allen and Ms. Battle were teachers at Anise Elementary School. Mr. Allen had 13 years of experience, while Ms. Battle only had 5. Mr. Allen's whole career had been at that school. However, Ms. Battle had only been there for two years. Ms. Heard and Mr. Holmes were teachers at Sweetbay Middle School, and they both held ESOL certifications, which were influential in the cluster they served. In addition, both had six years of teaching experience in the school district, five of those years at that middle school. Finally, it was Ms. Love's and Ms. Spears's third year at Loebner High School, but overall, it was fifteenth and sixth, respectively.

### **Action Research Design Team**

The members of the ARDT were selected based on their willingness to be active participants, their professional relationship with the primary researcher, and their knowledge of what it takes to be an assistant principal in the district. As demonstrated by Table 4.2, each member, except for the primary researcher, had state leadership certification to be an assistant principal, a school principal, or a principal's supervisor. However, they had varying degree levels (i.e., master's, specialist, doctorate).

There are two tiers to leadership certification in the study's state. One tier is for entry-level leadership positions. It is required to be an assistant principal or anything below the principal level that requires leadership certification. The second tier is needed for advanced-level leadership positions, school principals, and anyone supervising principals. Tier I is a master's-level certification, while Tier II is at the specialist-level. Suppose a candidate is hired for a leadership position in the state and does not yet hold the appropriate tiered leadership certification. In that case, he or she will be awarded a provisional certificate for up to three years (*Educational leadership*, 2020). The primary researcher held a master's degree in education and a Tier I certification at the time of the study.

**Table 4.2***Action Research Design Team Members' Certifications and Degree Levels*

| <b>Team Member</b>  | <b>Leadership Certifications</b>                         | <b>Highest Degree Level</b> |
|---------------------|--|-----------------------------|
| Primary Researcher  | Assistant Principal                                      | M.Ed.                       |
| Ms. Mary Palmer     | Assistant Principal<br>Principal<br>Principal Supervisor | M.Ed.                       |
| Dr. Belinda Keller  | Assistant Principal<br>Principal<br>Principal Supervisor | Ed.D                        |
| Mr. Sean Albertson  | Assistant Principal<br>Principal<br>Principal Supervisor | Ed.S                        |
| Ms. Kim Fountain    | Assistant Principal<br>Principal<br>Principal Supervisor | M.Ed.                       |
| Ms. Danielle Potter | Assistant Principal<br>Principal<br>Principal Supervisor | Ed.D                        |

**Findings from the Case**

This action research case study investigated how school and district leaders can support aspiring school assistant principals in acquiring the necessary leadership skills to obtain their goal leadership positions (i.e., assistant principal in the district). The participants were recommended by their current school principal and then allowed to accept the recommendation to be a part of the aspiring assistant principal pipeline program to build capacity regarding their leadership skills. Upon opting in, the ARIT members were asked to fill out and submit an application (Appendix C) so that the researcher could get to know them and understand their

aspirations to serve them better on their leadership journey. Interviews of the ARIT were conducted at the beginning and the end of the study, with questions tied to the original research questions and a focus group of members of the ARDT and other school and district leaders (Appendix D).

The data showed the teacher leader participants' varying leadership knowledge or skills and how that impacted their experience throughout the study. In addition, not all participants felt they were immediately ready for an assistant principal position, which influenced the outcome. Some felt that way before the study began and at the conclusion, while others changed their feelings throughout the cycles.

### **Action Research Cycle 1**

The first action research cycle began the first week of work for 11-month employees (i.e., assistant principals), which was also the week of the summer leadership conference for all school and district leaders. It was the last week of July 2023 (i.e., July 24, 2023), a week before pre-planning. The cycle lasted approximately six weeks and ended on September 1, 2023. The ARDT met the first week and met twice a month from that point forward. Additionally, the focus group was held that first week. The ARIT met as a group once per month for a professional development session.

### **Focus Group**

The focus group was held during the first week of the study, in late-July 2023. The focus group participants were school and district leaders, including all members of the ARDT and a few others in similar positions who had a deep knowledge of the cluster in which the study occurred. It was important for the primary researcher to ensure that many participants understood

the unique struggles that an assistant principal in the cluster would face compared to schools in the district serving distinctly different populations.

While many answers to the focus group questions asked were similar among school and district leaders, the one that all agreed upon was the most significant barrier faced in supporting aspiring assistant principals is having the time to do so. It was discussed that having an AP pipeline program that was beneficial and successful would be beneficial. The school district would need to set aside time for support intentionally. Teacher leaders would need to be provided with substitutes and excused during some class time. School and district leadership serving as mentors to aspiring APs would possibly need to have a few things taken off their plates or the ability to delegate specific tasks to be able to direct the necessary amount of attention toward mentorship. If that is not possible, maybe stipends could be provided to entice leaders to work beyond their extremely packed schedules. With this sort of mentorship occurring in the district, “it is typically an add-on to other duties and responsibilities as well as not as clearly outlined like with teacher support specialists and coaches for new or aspiring teachers,” according to Dr. Keller. Additionally, Ms. Palmer believes that most people do not think about the “extra time needed to ensure that any tasks provided to the aspiring AP are done correctly or accurately.”

In the district, it was discussed by the current school and district leaders that candidates applying to assistant principalships will need to:

- Be able to build positive relationships with all stakeholders
- Have conflict resolution skills
- Be open-minded and have a willingness to learn
- Be open to feedback

- Have communication skills
- Be organized
- Have a network of school and district leaders to go to for advice

Additionally, the leaders hope to learn about the program's potential success and its transferability to other schools or clusters within the district.

### **Initial Interviews**

The initial interviews of the teacher leader participants were conducted during the beginning of the first cycle (i.e., approximately August 2, 2023). The interview questions were developed based on the three research questions and were very similar to those asked at the end of the study. According to Seidman (2019):

Interviewing is both a research methodology and a social relationship that must be nurtured, sustained, and then ended gracefully. In part, each interviewing relationship is individually crafted. It reflects the personalities of the participant and the interviewer and the ways they interact. The relationship is also a reflection of the purpose, structure, and method of in-depth interviewing (p. 101).

Participants shared that they hoped that the meetings were “safe places to share thoughts and feelings,” and they were interested in learning about the “day-to-day functions” of an assistant principal. They also wanted to know how to triage things thrown at them when in the role. Along the same lines, Ms. Spears shared that she wanted to know how to balance instructional versus operational tasks, especially when it seems like more is expected of building leaders year after year.

Mr. Allen stated, "Instructional leadership supports teachers with curriculum, modeling, expectations, and providing feedback on strategies and ways to improve where needed." Mr.

Holmes said his “principal involves [him] in the instructional walkthroughs where [they] review a list of [things to look for], and as a team [they] report back on what [they] have observed.”

While Ms. Heard said she did not think she had any instructional leadership experience at the beginning of the study, she described it as “helping educators to stay abreast of current trends in education, supporting faculty in obtaining classroom resources, testing, and scheduling.” Others mentioned they have had opportunities to lead professional development sessions in smaller settings at their respective schools.

For operational leadership, Ms. Battle discussed that it “is anything that happens outside of the classroom that helps a school run daily” and that she is involved in arrival and dismissal procedures at her school and is on the school safety or emergency team. Alternatively, Ms. Love shared that she is the “least excited” about learning about this type of leadership, is “not exactly sure what it looks like,” and does not believe she has any experience in the area. Similarly, most of the participants were unsure of this type of leadership and did not have much experience in the category.

Parent and family engagement was an area of leadership that seemed to interest almost all the teacher leaders. Their concern, however, was how to “attack it” in an area with such a language barrier and where parental involvement seems limited. In addition, few had experience with schoolwide engagement or engaging parents and families outside of their classrooms. However, Ms. Spears said that “it involves building a collaborative culture where everyone can support the needs of students,” and she is “a part of the [principal’s advisory council].” She also helps “plan monthly parent meetings for Title I.”

Regarding the influence of the program on the ARIT’s leadership skills, Mr. Allen said that “if [he walks] away knowing more than [he] came in knowing, then [he] will know the

program had an impact.” Ms. Love, however, said that she is “excited about hands-on opportunities like shadowing and hearing from leaders [and she will] know [if the] program had an impact on [her] leadership capabilities if [she has] a greater understanding of educational leadership in general, as well as specific roles.”

Finally, Mr. Holmes and Ms. Heard discussed that they “do not like not to know things” and hope they learn what will be expected of them in the role of assistant principal. Mr. Allen hoped to learn about resume writing and how to survive his “first year as an AP.”

### **Intervention for Action Research Cycle 1**

Participants were asked to complete an operational leadership simulation regarding school safety for the first intervention. They were given one week to complete the *SchoolSims* simulation independently and report on their experience and what they learned about operational leadership. The website’s description of the virtual experience reads, “In the face of a potential threat to students, you will work with others to respond decisively, while balancing conflicting considerations.” It also discusses that the outcomes and journeys change and differ depending on the selections or decisions made. Ultimately, the aspiring AP is expected to realize some aspects of their leadership style. The primary characters were a nervous seventh grade student, the AP, and the school resource officer (SRO).

Before having the ARIT complete the simulation, we discussed different aspects of operational leadership. As a group, we conducted another simulation so that they would understand the concept and what was expected of them. In addition, we reviewed the first chapter of Kafele (2019), *Is my school a better school because I lead it?* The chapter discusses one’s leadership identity. Kafele (2019) questions, “Who are you once you put that [assistant] principal’s uniform on?” and “What is it about your leadership style that sets you apart from

everyone else?” (p. 3). These tasks were essential to build prior knowledge and act as a guide in completing the intervention.

The school safety simulation was chosen based on its description and that it was a real-world, authentic, and timely experience. Ms. Heard described the simulation by stating:

Derek, a seventh-grade student, sought out the counselor to report a strange student who made threatening remarks on the school bus. Derek could not give any identifying details about the student other than he appeared older, had a black bookbag, and wore a hoodie.

Derek was visibly shaken.

The others had very similar descriptions. However, they were not as detailed.

Participants were asked to discuss what they felt they did that was “right” and what they thought they could do better in the future. Mr. Allen felt he “kept the environment calm without disrupting the whole school building.” Ms. Spears said she “immediately contacted the school principal about the threat and called the district office to inform the associate superintendent.” As a group, we discussed that the protocols for informing superiors or the chain of command could differ depending on the school district's size and makeup. Ms. Love, alternatively, said that she “instantly gathered the crisis response team (CRT), and [that] was a good choice.” In addition, she “communicated to possibly affected personnel and the SRO so that he could contact the local authorities.”

Instead of taking that route, Mr. Holmes feels that “in hindsight [he] should have called the CRT right away instead of only seeking out the principal,” Also, he would have “developed a letter or some form of communication to go home to parents and families.” Ms. Battle said:

Though I believe in clear and effective communication, I would not have chosen to convene the CRT immediately had I known the SRO would pull Derek to interview him.

I also did not realize that my character would suggest pulling video footage from transportation. Those actions seem redundant and a waste of precious time. Next time, I would prefer to put the school into a Level II lockdown, I think.

Ms. Spears said the feedback she received at the end of the simulation stated that she needed more information to conduct a search, and, finally, Mr. Allen said that he might have pulled one student at a time instead of three to speak to them to improve communication.

The final things the group discussed at the activity's completion were what they felt they learned and what questions or wonderings they still had. All stated that they knew that remaining calm and trying to act quickly but still taking a moment to look at all angles, as best as possible, would have been necessary. In addition, Ms. Heard learned that “contacting the district office was paramount to the situation,” while Ms. Spears commented that prioritizing “effective communication” was necessary. Ms. Love wondered “if there is ever a perfect solution or set of choices in a crisis,” and all asked what the protocol in the study’s district is regarding sharing information in a situation with a potential threat.

### **Action Research Cycle 2**

The second action research cycle began right after Labor Day (i.e., September 5, 2023) and lasted approximately six weeks, ending on October 13, 2023. The ARDT continued to meet every other week, and the ARIT met as a whole group once during that time, on September 25, 2023, for a professional development session, after which the participants completed a feedback questionnaire (Appendix D) based on the gathering. As part of the continuous improvement process and action research's iterative and cyclical nature, reflection occurred throughout cycles one and two. From cycle one, it was learned that a one-on-one session was necessary to help the participants progress in their leadership skill acquisition. Therefore, virtual coaching sessions

occurred during cycle two. It was also realized that a feedback questionnaire could be beneficial as it would give the participants time to reflect on their practice, the impact felt, and what they have learned before commenting on the session.

### **Intervention for Action Research Cycle 2**

For the second intervention, the ARIT members were asked to create and deliver a professional learning opportunity (PLO) for their school's staff. The strictest guideline was sticking to the timeline of the cycle. However, they were able to develop and lead the session alone or with a partner. While it was encouraged to be in front of the whole staff, they were told that they needed to have the approval and support of their administration, so some did it for a smaller group (i.e., their content or grade level teams). Before agreeing to be a research site and submitting recommendations for names of participants, principals were informed of this and other tasks or interventions that the ARIT would have to complete. The PLO needed to be innovative and new or something that was recommended for the school based on a needs assessment.

As the Digital Learning Team leader, Ms. Love delivered PLO regarding integrating other instructional programs and assessment platforms (i.e., Illuminate, Quizizz, Pear Deck, and Nearpod) into the teachers' Canvas platforms. Canvas is the district-approved learning management system (LMS). She said that many teachers requested this information to increase technology use in the classroom and create a more seamless grading system by inputting grades from the LMS to Infinite Campus, the district-approved student information system (SIS). She said the presentation intentionally did not take up too much time as she wanted much of the period to be a work session for her colleagues to learn from one another and collaborate on what was known. Time to work and collaborate was also something that the teachers had requested.

The session closed with a “whip-around” activity in which teachers were asked what they created in Canvas to start utilizing in their courses immediately. This activity was where she “whipped around” the room and asked teachers a question, and they quickly answered. They were allowed to say the same thing as someone else if they added something additional.

Mr. Allen presented the Concrete, Representational, and Abstract (CRA) Model for mathematics instruction to his whole school. He said this was essential for the teachers at his school to learn about because:

As a school with a high population of ESOL students, it is important for students to not only understand [the math concept] but to be able to see the math they are working on.

The goal of this [PLO] is to help teachers understand the progression of the model and how they can be effective in using it.

He explained to his audience that an overlap between the phases is expected and needed. The manipulatives used in the concrete phase can also be utilized in other phases to reinforce the learning. He also mentioned that if a student gets stuck and cannot figure out the answer in the abstract phase, he or she can return to the representational or concrete. He stated that he wanted teachers to leave with hands-on experience, so he had them participate in an activity where they worked in pairs with fraction manipulatives to explore and represent the given fractions.

They were asked to divide them into equal parts and physically manipulate the pieces to create an understanding of what the given fraction meant. After, teachers were asked to represent what they learned on a whiteboard. They drew pictures or diagrams that represented the fractions they were working with and labeled the parts next to the representation. Then, in the abstract stage, they worked with symbolic representations of the fractions and solved mathematical operations in groups. They were asked to discuss strategies for teaching abstract concepts using

the foundation they built in the concrete and representational stages. Finally, Mr. Allen summarized the key points from the session and the benefits of the CRA model for teaching fractions to elementary school students. The session ended with a few teachers stating how to incorporate this model into their lesson plans.

As Ms. Heard and Mr. Holmes work at the same school, they decided to work together to create a PL session. They wanted to do something innovative and something with the content as well as the delivery model. They focused on lesson planning for ELLs with artificial intelligence (AI) and delivered the sessions to their respective grade-level content teams. In addition, the session received such praise that they have decided to continue it as a group learning session every other Friday. At these sessions, teachers are encouraged, but not forced, to get together to learn innovative strategies incorporating AI or another form of technology from one another. They entitled their session “Work smarter, not harder.” They concentrated on *Magicschool.ai* and *Diffit.me*, both created with teachers and students in mind.

Ms. Heard modeled the first, which is a lesson plan and science lab generator with a text translator tool. It also instantly creates rubrics and word problems for mathematics instruction, saving time for teachers. It was seen as beneficial to ELLs, the majority of the student population at Sweetbay Middle School. It aids in differentiation by providing leveled and scaffolded texts that automatically define vocabulary for pre-teaching and creating a list of questions to gauge comprehension and understanding. Finally, it has an Individualized Education Program (IEP) generator for SWDs.

After the teachers were given time to work with that tool, Mr. Holmes presented the other. With the second tool, teachers can instantly differentiate texts for ELLs or SWDs and provide them with their necessary accommodations. Teachers can search for a topic and choose

the appropriate grade level and language. So, teachers at Sweetbay Middle School could also provide a text in Spanish to gauge a student's reading abilities in their native language to quickly see if he or she needs to be sent through the Multi-tiered System of Supports (MTSS) or Response to Intervention (RTI) process for a possible cognitive barrier or if he or she solely has a language barrier. It was discussed that providing a text in Spanish could also be used for quicker comprehension or for students to practice good reader behaviors at home with their parents and families who often feel at a loss with how to assist their children with their homework.

### **Professional Development and One-on-One Coaching**

One-on-one coaching sessions were held in the first couple weeks of October 2023. The selection of that time for the meetings to occur was strategic by the primary researcher. By that date, the ARIT had participated in an initial interview, two professional development sessions, the first and, for many, the second intervention. It allowed participants to ask more intentional questions about their journeys and leadership trajectories.

The monthly professional development sessions included information on the intervention theme for that cycle (i.e., operational leadership, instructional leadership, or parent and family engagement), resume writing, and potential interview questions. According to Zepeda (2018):

When teachers engage in job-embedded learning, their learning [is] closely connected and aligned with the actual work... through collaboration and support of colleagues and others such as instructional coaches and school leaders. Job-embedded learning is relevant and promotes collegiality, enhances reflection, combats isolation, and provides timely feedback that facilitates the transfer of new skills into practice, which should be the objective of all professional development (p. 2).

The coaching sessions were directly tied to the learning in the professional development sessions, as the same characteristics can apply to both types of knowledge. “Coaching is an individualized, differentiated, and dynamic approach to professional learning that supports teachers regardless of career stage, length in the profession, or background preparation (Zepeda, 2018, p. 5).”

In this cycle’s professional development session, we discussed chapters eight and nine in *All other duties as assigned: The assistant principal’s critical role in supporting schools inside and out* (Donlan, 2022) and how they relate to instructional leadership. The eighth chapter discusses safeguarding an equitable education for all students, while the ninth is about taking time for teaching and learning. Donlan (2022), when referring to creating an inclusive and equitable learning environment, states:

In championing all students, it is necessary to develop an operating definition of what all includes. All students, includes students who are diverse in terms of their physiology and personality as well as those with differing levels of academic aptitude and proficiency. Diversity of race and ethnicity is also key as we seek to recognize and embrace differences, not minimize them. The notion of all students includes those with different identities, such as gender identity, sexual orientation, and factors pertaining to student self-concept, self-esteem, and self-efficacy (p. 132).

The chapter discusses “bubble” students, or those on the cusp of performing at a higher level, and the subgroups or demographic categories of those students, as well as economically disadvantaged students, SWDs, and ELLs. How to “level the playing field” was discussed amongst the group, and equality and equity are different. With the population that all of the participants and the primary researcher serve, we should be more concerned with equity, and just

because information may exist and be available to a large number of ELLs and Spanish-speaking families regarding optional instructional programs or courses does not mean that they have access to it. “Access and equity [mean] having an intentional plan to let students and families know not only what opportunities are available but how to prepare best [them] to get those opportunities (p. 137).

In chapter nine, we learned that while instructional leadership, explicitly teaching and learning, should be centered around data, relationship building is arguably just as important. Donlan (2022) discusses a time in which he was the sole building administrator:

During that time, I had the opportunity to take time for teaching and learning through many classroom visits, particularly through amazing experiences watching our band teacher, Robert Gulash, with the high school concert band. He was not only a deft musician but a true master of student-centered teaching. Even the students who gave most other teachers difficulty were no problem for Mr. Gulash. I learned volumes about how to connect with our most challenging students by watching the way he approached conversations and microcorrections. Students hung on his every word and were willing to try difficult things in full view of their peers, which would have brought about certain disruptions in other classes. This didn’t necessarily stem from a love for music; many of these students were required to take band by their parents. Others shared with me they only took the class because of the magic and care of the teacher in front of them. They didn’t want to let him down (p. 151).

Participants discussed how they had seen similar things in their schools with struggling students; that if students felt safe and cared for by a teacher, they were generally more willing to do more or push harder for him or her than someone whom they did not feel that same way about or

someone they did not feel they had a positive relationship with. While this is significant with all students, it would be crucial for an administrator to encourage his or her teachers to foster these relationships with the bubble students discussed in the previous chapter, as it could increase the school's overall performance score. As a group, we also discussed how to triage the operational issues that arise, as discussed in cycle one, so that the instructional can be at the forefront or the central focus of an AP's day.

While most coaching sessions reaffirmed the participants' original aspiration of someday becoming an assistant principal in the district, Ms. Heard said that she appreciated being selected for the program and looks forward to learning and growing more. However, she is now leaning toward not wanting to become an assistant principal, especially not soon. She discussed that she thinks she was in the "bubble" of her classroom and only sees things through that lens. With that, she wanted to be a part of the solution to all the "problems" she saw at the building leader level. However, when she realized that there were so many more lenses through which to look at a problem and that many of the "decisions" made by building leaders were coming from above them, she saw that the solutions were not as simple as she thought. She mentioned that learning all of that made her have a greater appreciation for administrators, and she was not sure that she still wanted to leave the "safety" of her classroom. Others stated that they did not realize the different facets of leadership. While they may feel that they have grown in one (i.e., instruction, operations, or parent and family engagement), they have more work to do in the others before they may want to apply for a position.

However, Ms. Love mentioned that she was struggling to have difficult conversations with colleagues when in a leadership position. The primary researcher added that the most important thing is to build positive relationships with colleagues, just like a teacher should with

his or her students. Then, the “difficult conversations” are sometimes less confrontational. It was said that leaders should use the “art of adaptive communication,” as Donlan (2022) discussed. He stated that it “involves learning about how people’s personalities are put together – understanding first, before being understood – then learning to speak the language of personality so that you will not be off-putting as you work to be of service to others” (p. 67). The primary researcher cautioned that this is not an easy thing to do and that it takes much practice. She mentioned that this was a struggle earlier in her career, especially as a teacher leader when one does not have authority over a colleague. As Kafele (2023) discussed, the two spoke about the importance of continuous work on conflict resolution, communication, and effective feedback skills. Also, there are four essential types of communication (i.e., verbal, non-verbal, interpersonal, and written), and a building leader should be proficient in all (Kafele, 2023).

### **Feedback Questionnaire**

A feedback questionnaire (Appendix D) was sent to the participants at the end of the second cycle. The questionnaire was short and consisted of four questions. The consensus was that the program impacted their leadership skills up to this point and that a great deal was learned about the role of assistant principal. However, there were varying answers in terms of current leadership aspirations. Ms. Spears said that she learned how to provide effective feedback and timely when she completes observations and how to tackle operational tasks. She also stated that she is participating in a training session preparing her for the state leadership assessment to obtain her certification, as she still wants to be an assistant principal. The next thing she said she would need assistance with is preparing her to apply and interview. Finally, she wanted to know what additional resources could be provided to her to assist with refining her operational leadership skills, as she felt that was her weakest area.

Ms. Love stated that while she no longer has immediate plans to leave the classroom, she still wants to become an assistant principal. So, in the meantime, she will take on additional leadership opportunities in her current school to add to her experience. She said:

I've enjoyed getting to hear from others about their perspectives on leadership and their aspirations. I have learned to consider certain issues through a leadership lens. For example, I've thought about how a leader can manage a situation while balancing the needs and well-being of multiple stakeholders (i.e., teachers, staff, families, students). I have also considered how my specific experiences might be framed as leadership experiences. We discussed this in the context of writing résumés and interviewing, but I also think this has been valuable for my self-perception as a teacher.

While reflecting, she realized that she leads from a place of support, and that will be helpful to her in a future assistant principalship. She still questions how to have tactful or courageous conversations with colleagues or subordinates who may be pushing back.

Mr. Allen said he feels more comfortable knowing how to run a school. He now knows that building positive relationships with all stakeholders will help him be successful in a leadership role. He said, "Also, sometimes you have to learn how to work with those teachers who are stuck in their ways because the overall goal is to help not only the students be successful but also the teachers." However, after delivering his professional learning session, he wondered how to deal with teachers who tuned out what was happening and did not focus on the work, even when it was best for students. Finally, he would like the next session to focus more on the certification process and whether a renewable certificate is required before being promoted to assistant principal.

Ms. Heard spoke about the pushback she felt that she received with completing the instructional task during the second intervention. She said the principal received the presentation's theme well, but it was challenging to find an agreed-upon time that she could present the PL on AI. She realized that relationships matter and that she should always try to anticipate roadblocks that may be faced when enacting a plan. When she did get to deliver the PL, she found that it was well received. She said:

I was very grateful for the few teachers that attended. They asked some excellent questions that I had not anticipated, which made me consider how to reframe this PL going forward. After school, I walked into the copy room to find one of the teachers, who had been in attendance, making copies for the following week. She said she had used one of the websites I had shown to differentiate a text for her students.

In addition, she mentioned that she has learned that successful leadership relies on bridging the gap between conflicting points of view or explaining protocols and procedures. She noted that she felt unsure whether she wanted to go into administration. She realized:

Administrators have to walk a tightrope with problem faculty. It takes a long paper trail to get rid of someone who is a bad colleague or teacher once they are tenured. The extra burden falls on good faculty, who then grow resentful and transfer to 'greener pastures,' which then leaves the admin team scrambling to find replacements when there is a shortage of teachers.

### **Action Research Cycle 3**

The third intervention cycle occurred between October 16, 2023 – December 1, 2023. The members of the ARDT discussed the challenges faced at each of their schools in terms of engaging parents and families. The challenges mentioned had many similarities, including the

language barrier, socioeconomic status, and level of education that the majority of parents and families have. Teacher leaders at all levels mentioned the need for parents and families to understand the importance of daily attendance and that, when asked, many want to figure out how to help their children with assignments at home. There was also discussion on the difference in messages that may be needed between elementary, middle, and high school regarding the importance of daily attendance. At the elementary level, the parents are responsible for getting the student up and ready for school each morning. Although the parent has a responsibility when a child is in middle or high school, students often get themselves up and prepared as a parent may be at work. Often, it was mentioned that parents do not know a middle or high school student does not attend class. These conversations led to the intervention for this cycle.

### **Intervention for Action Research Cycle 3**

The intervention for action research cycle three consisted of ARDT members creating and leading a parent and family engagement initiative at their respective schools. The goal was for this to go beyond a simple parent meeting and to be something continuous that had more of a lasting impact. It could be small (i.e., in a classroom) or large-scale (i.e., the whole school), depending on the level of leadership responsibility the teacher leader had and how large-scale their administration would allow it to be.

Ms. Spears realized that her school needed parents to understand their instructional initiatives and how they could help their students at home. On November 8, 2023, she held a parent meeting in which parents engaged in activities related to Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) and their Comprehensive School Improvement Plan (CSIP). The meeting started by showing parents how students log on to i-Ready. A kindergarten lesson was shown on the screen for parents to see what the platform looks like from the students' points of

view. After this, the parents were given a STEM challenge. They had to build a structure that could hold Santa. The STEM process was explained to parents during the activity, and at the end, parents had to reflect on and share about their design. A connection was then made between math and writing. Next, the CSIP priority areas were shared with parents. It was explained how i-Ready is used during the work period at a technology center and that the STEM process utilized by the school supports students' creative and critical thinking.

As part of the action research process, we reflected on Ms. Spears' parent meeting, how it could have been more effective, and how to make it something that does not end with just one meeting. She stated that although her administration supported the meeting, getting something on the school calendar with other pre-planned meetings was difficult. In addition, we talked about the fact that many parents do not have transportation. Therefore, each leader needs to be strategic about meetings and when to ask parents to come to the school so they do not need to pay for a taxi consistently. She said she learned that more parents would have come if given more notice and that it may be beneficial to put more time into planning the meeting and the agenda to not seem like disconnected topics. She said while she does not have plans for this, she would like to create a monthly Parent University series during the second semester of the year. She may try to hold meetings at various times throughout the day and add a virtual option. In the future, she also mentioned wanting to partner with other schools in the cluster to share resources and have a more significant impact.

Ms. Love attempted to create a monthly newsletter in English and Spanish for all parents and families of tenth-grade students. She struggled to get other teachers on board to contribute, and as she does not teach all tenth-grade students herself, she knew that it was essential that others were onboard. She surveyed the parents of students in her classroom as well as spoke to

students about how to best reach the parents. Many discussed social media and messaging platforms, specifically Facebook and WhatsApp. While the school has its own Facebook group, a group of parents have their own WhatsApp that most of the community is a part of. It was suggested that she contact one of the group's organizers and have him or her be a liaison between the school and the households. Ms. Love decided that she would have the newsletter posted on the school's Facebook page and work with one of the parents to get it out in the WhatsApp group.

Over the course of the six weeks of the action research cycle, her plan kept getting more refined. She used the school principal's "week-at-a-glance" emails as a guide. While she could not get participation from other teachers for her first two weekly newsletters, she could share the increased engagement of parents in just her classroom in that short period. By the sixth week, she had one other teacher participate, and they worked collectively to provide text in both languages and video and audio as well, as a number of parents are illiterate in both languages. As for what she learned and her plans for the future, she wished that she knew how to overcome the barrier of failed participation from colleagues, and she would like to find a way to provide the information in Bengali and Vietnamese. While Spanish is the predominant language in the households of the students at the high school, some also speak those other languages. She also mentioned that she wants to continue this as a pilot for the remainder of the 2023-2024 school year and try to get at least two teachers from each grade level to be a part of the team next year. She believed that the principal's memos to parents are extremely helpful but do not intimately demonstrate what is going on in the classrooms, and a newsletter like the one she started could do so. By the end, she collaborated with another teacher to create bilingual content. She wanted to overcome barriers to

colleague participation and expand language accessibility. She plans to continue the pilot next year, involving more teachers to better communicate classroom activities to parents.

### **Final Interviews**

During the final interview, the ARDT members were asked similar questions to those they were asked in the initial interview (Appendix D). Mr. Holmes commented on the resources that were shared as helpful, including ChatGPT, SchoolSims leadership simulations, and effective feedback protocols. Before the program began, Mr. Holmes mentioned that he only believed instructional leadership affected students and had not thought about the impact it has on teachers and the school community. He said, “Due to the program, during the semester, I participated in instructional walks with the leadership team. Afterward, we analyzed data to determine continuous learning opportunities for teachers.” He also commented, “We selected teachers who were displaying rigor in the areas of ESOL or SPED, and asking higher order thinking questions, formative assessments for closings, and differentiation in math, reading, or writing.” From what he learned, he suggested that a “Sweetbay Middle School University” be created and implemented with Speed Learning opportunities for the teachers at least monthly instead of faculty meetings.

“Speed learning” is a concept that many schools in the cluster under the leadership of the regional superintendent have participated in before the start of this study. It centers around educators educating other educators on best practices in any area that may be of interest. However, sometimes, the themes or topics are more targeted regarding a specific subject matter that would benefit the population the school or schools serve. For instance, in the past, cluster leaders participated in speed learning centered around ESOL. During the 2 rounds, there are about 10 different sessions that learners can choose from, and each round lasts no more than 7

minutes. Presenters are tasked with creating a presentation that fits within the allotted time and preparing a takeaway to help educators implement the concept the next day.

Ms. Spears, however, spoke of what she had learned and how she had grown in the area of operational leadership. As an MTSS Specialist, she said she is “aware of student behavior and parental concerns. [She] also [understands] staff concerns are handled by administrators so they can remain confidential.” She shadowed her assistant principal in dealing with behavioral concerns and watched as her principal treated community or stakeholder concerns during parent meetings. As an emergency response team member, she also assisted when her school was forced to go on lockdown due to something occurring in the community directly next to the school. After things had calmed down, she could debrief with her administrators and other team members to understand better why that was necessary and how decisions are quickly made in stressful situations. They also reflected on how to improve their practices in the future.

Mr. Allen said that the program helped him expand his knowledge and add to his resume around parent and family engagement. In the past, he did not have much experience in that area of leadership outside of his immediate classroom. This semester, he “was able to collaborate with and support [regional leaders] regarding the needs of [his] school’s students, staff, parents, families, and community members.” He also mentioned that the program was very “resourceful,” and he was able to grow in instructional and operational leadership.

Ms. Love, similarly, spoke of her growth in all facets of leadership. However, she especially saw the resume critiques and mock interviews as most helpful. She mentioned “a direct connection between resume critiques and activities members of the ARIT were asked to complete. They were real-world situations and leadership experiences that [she] was able to immediately add to [her] resume to make [herself] more marketable.” She also said that she felt

better prepared to apply for and begin a state leadership certification program. She now knew that there was a wealth of untapped leadership opportunities at her school, and she would have many opportunities to complete her required hours, which was previously a concern of hers.

### **Chapter Summary**

This action research case study examined the support provided by school and district leaders to aspiring school assistant principals in developing the necessary leadership skills to attain assistant principal positions within the district. Participants recommended by their current school principals joined the aspiring assistant principal pipeline program, filling out applications to facilitate the researcher's understanding of their goals. Interviews were conducted with the ARIT at the study's commencement and conclusion, along with a focus group involving ARDT members and other experienced school and district leaders. The data revealed varying leadership knowledge and skill levels among teacher-leader participants, impacting their experiences and readiness for assistant principal roles.

Each action research cycle occurred over a period of about six weeks, with subsequent meetings and professional development sessions. The focus group highlighted the significant barrier of time constraints in supporting aspiring assistant principals, suggesting the need for intentional time allocation and possible incentives for mentors. The district's leadership outlined desired qualities for assistant principal candidates, emphasizing relationship-building, conflict resolution, openness to feedback, communication skills, organization, and a network of mentors. The study aimed to assess program success and its potential applicability to other district schools or clusters.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS FROM THE ACTION RESEARCH CASE**

This chapter analyzes emergent themes from data collected during three action research cycles in the fall semester of the 2023-2024 school year in an urban school district's Southern Magnolia cluster in the southeastern United States. The research method included tightly aligned cycles with the logic model and theoretical framework, employing interviews, observations, questionnaires, a focus group, and a researcher's journal for data gathering.

Members of the ARDT met frequently throughout the process to review the data that had been collected and made recommendations and determinations as to whether modifications to the plan needed to be made for a better outcome. Meanwhile, members of the ARIT engaged in PLOs centered around three facets of leadership: operational, instructional, and parent and family engagement.

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to improve a leadership development program for aspiring assistant principals in an urban school cluster.

#### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What leadership behaviors do teachers in an aspiring leadership program identify as supportive in building their leadership capacity?
2. How did the aspiring leadership program participants describe the program's impact on their practice and understanding of leadership roles?

3. What did the action research team members learn through the process of implementing an aspiring leadership program?

### Thematic Analysis

The theoretical framework utilized in this study was based on Groves' (2007) Theory of Succession Planning. The study focused heavily on steps two, three, and four: identifying mentoring relationships, developing leadership skills, and reinforcing an organizational culture of leadership development. Based on the literature and the three action research cycles, five themes emerged, with three being the most prevalent. Table 5.1 demonstrates the number of times each theme was mentioned and which research questions they pertain to most.

**Table 5.1**

*Frequency of Themes Connected to Research Questions*

| <b>Themes</b>   | <b>Frequency per Research Question</b> | <b>Overall Frequency</b> |
|---|--|--------------------------|
| Theme 1: Understanding Expectations/<br>Preparedness  | RQ1: 7<br>RQ2: 15<br>RQ3: 8            | 30                       |
| Theme 2: Resourcefulness                              | RQ1: 2<br>RQ2: 8<br>RQ3: 16            | 26                       |
| Theme 3: Communication Skills/<br>Conflict Resolution | RQ1: 10<br>RQ2: 8<br>RQ3: 18           | 36                       |
| Theme 4: Building Relationships/<br>Collaboration     | RQ1: 6<br>RQ2: 11<br>RQ3: 18           | 35                       |
| Theme 5: Building Capacity                            | RQ1: 14<br>RQ2: 12<br>RQ3: 9           | 35                       |

Of the five emergent themes, the action research team members mentioned the importance of communication skills and the knowledge of how to resolve conflicts. Following close behind were building relationships or collaboration and building capacity. According to Jung and Sheldon (2020), it is crucial for an aspiring assistant principal to have good communication and conflict resolution skills, along with the ability to build relationships and be collaborative, for several reasons:

1. **Effective Leadership:** As an assistant principal, you are in a leadership position. Good communication skills are crucial for conveying expectations, goals, and plans to teachers, staff, students, and parents. Clear communication ensures that everyone understands their roles and responsibilities within the school community.
2. **Conflict Resolution:** Conflicts can arise in any school environment, whether among students, teachers, or staff members. An assistant principal with strong conflict resolution skills can address issues promptly and professionally, preventing conflicts from escalating and disrupting the school's atmosphere.
3. **Building Relationships:** Building positive relationships with students, teachers, parents, and other stakeholders is vital. It helps create a supportive and inclusive school culture where everyone feels valued and heard. This fosters a conducive learning environment and encourages collaboration.
4. **Collaboration:** Schools thrive when there is collaboration among administrators, teachers, and support staff. Being collaborative allows for the sharing of ideas, best practices, and resources, ultimately benefiting the students' education. Assistant principals who encourage collaboration can help improve teaching methods and student outcomes.

5. **Problem Solving:** Effective communication, conflict resolution, and collaboration skills are essential for problem-solving. School assistant principals often encounter various challenges, from academic issues to disciplinary matters. Strong interpersonal skills enable them to work with others to find solutions and make informed decisions.
6. **Parent-Teacher Relationships:** Assistant principals often interact with parents regarding their children's education and well-being. Good communication and relationship-building skills help in creating trust and transparency, which are essential for productive parent-teacher partnerships.
7. **Role Modeling:** As a leader in the school, an assistant principal sets an example for students and staff. Demonstrating strong communication, conflict resolution, and collaboration skills sets a positive example and reinforces the desired behavior within the school community.
8. **Crisis Management:** In times of crisis, such as emergencies or sensitive incidents, these skills are crucial. Effective communication helps disseminate information, calm concerns, and ensure safety. Conflict resolution can help manage heightened emotions, and collaboration is essential for coordinating responses.

Good communication and conflict resolution skills, along with the ability to build relationships and be collaborative, can contribute significantly to a school's success and harmonious operation, fostering a positive learning environment for students and a supportive atmosphere for teachers and staff.

### **Research Question 1**

The first research question was about the capacity building of aspiring assistant principals and the skills they saw as most important to their development. The data showed that the ARIT

members identified several leadership behaviors as supportive in building their leadership capacity. The characteristics encompassed a mix of personality traits, communication skills, and managerial abilities that are essential for effective leadership in educational settings. In addition to experienced leaders participating in a focus group, the teacher leaders were interviewed at the beginning and end of the study. They were observed as they completed tasks for the interventions during each action research cycle, completed feedback questionnaires, and participated in shadowing and mentoring conversations with experienced leaders.

### **Clear Communication**

The theme of clear communication was the most prominent theme in all data sets. The theme occurred 36 times. It was demonstrated that effective communication is foundational to all aspects of leadership and can assist in conflict resolution when needed. It ensures that expectations are understood, ideas are shared, and feedback is exchanged openly. During the focus group, Mr. Albertson shared that as an assistant principal, “clear communication isn't just about relaying information; it's about fostering understanding and trust among all stakeholders. Our ability to communicate effectively ensures that our vision is shared, our expectations are clear, and our goals are achieved collaboratively.” He stated that when mentoring an aspiring assistant principal, he is sure to show that being clear and concise is best to ensure there is no miscommunication or misunderstanding. He also mentioned the importance of referring to pre-established protocols or regulations when communicating with subordinates. He spoke specifically about the Southern Magnolia cluster: “In our school community, [clear communication] is like the glue that holds us together. It helps us understand each other better, solve problems, and share our successes. Without it, our teamwork and leadership wouldn't be as strong.”

## **Building Relationships and Collaboration**

Building relationships and collaboration was one the most recurrent themes in the data, coming up on 35 occasions. The regional leaders, Ms. Palmer, and Dr. Keller, spoke most about these skills during the focus group. Ms. Palmer said:

Collaboration is a superpower. It's about breaking down silos, leveraging diverse perspectives, and combining our efforts toward common goals. As leaders, we recognize that our most outstanding achievements are not born from individual endeavors but from the collective strength of a united school community.

Later, she reiterated her point by stating:

As assistant principals, collaboration shouldn't just be a strategy but part of a person's leadership philosophy. By fostering a culture of collaboration, we harness the collective expertise, creativity, and passion of our team to tackle challenges, seize opportunities, and achieve our shared vision of success.

Ms. Palmer discussed that creating a collaborative environment between leaders and schools was one of the most important things for her to do within the Southern Magnolia cluster, especially with its demographics and needs being vastly different from that of the rest of the district.

Dr. Keller focused more heavily on relationship building. She spoke about it during the focus group and when she talked to the teacher leaders at a professional development session. She highlighted that just as with student-teacher relationships, leader-teacher relationships matter. A person, be it a student or teacher, is more inclined to do something that is expected of them when the person "in charge" has built a relationship. She emphasized:

Building relationships is more than just a task; it is a calling. It's about connecting with people on a human level, listening with empathy, and investing in the well-being and

success of every individual we serve. This is not that different from when we were teachers with our students. Our ability to cultivate strong relationships is what fuels our leadership journey.

She mentioned that relationships have a “transformative power” and that “by building authentic and meaningful relationships with our stakeholders, we create a foundation of trust, respect, and mutual support.”

### **Adaptability**

The data demonstrated the value of being flexible and adaptable as a leader. A leader always needs to be “thinking at least a few steps ahead” and “ready for change at any time,” said Mr. Albertson. He mentioned that he always brainstorms what could go wrong and tries to create multiple avenues for a solution “just in case.” He said:

Being adaptable is the key to staying ahead of the curve. Our ability to pivot, innovate, and navigate change with resilience ensures that we remain agile and responsive to the needs of our stakeholders. It’s about embracing uncertainty as an opportunity for growth and leveraging challenges as methods for improvement.

### **Support and Mentorship**

As the Coordinator of Leadership Development, Ms. Fountain underlined the importance of being in a supportive environment with at least one mentor when considering taking the leap into school leadership. “Support and mentorship lie at the heart of leadership. As we understand that our greatest asset is our people, we nurture the talents and potential of our staff. We cultivate a culture of continuous growth, collaboration, and excellence,” she said.

Mentorship occurred for each of the teacher leaders throughout the course of the study. Of the six, four were mentored by one of their assistant principals and two by their current principal. One of the mentors was a member of the ARDT. She said:

In the role of school leader, our commitment to support and guidance is more than just a job. It should be a privilege. It's about investing in the success and well-being of every school community member, empowering them to reach their full potential and contribute meaningfully to our collective mission.

The mentor-mentee relationships will continue beyond the study. The teacher leaders are encouraged to make additional connections with leaders in and outside the district to expand their skills and knowledge base.

### **Reflection**

The logic model and the cyclical process of the action research spoke to reflection being an important leadership trait. Ms. Potter said, "Being a reflective leader is like having a mirror for our actions and decisions. It helps us learn from our experiences, grow from our mistakes, and continuously improve as we guide our school community toward success."

True reflection did not come easy to the teacher leaders. Many struggled with taking ownership of their actions, being self-aware, and receiving constructive feedback initially. Due to this, a conversation occurred between the researcher and the other members of the ARIT. At the beginning of the study, four out of six teachers thought they were prepared to be an assistant principal immediately, and one was unsure why he was being passed up for interviews or not being recognized for accomplishments. A sense of continuous improvement and being a lifelong learner was discussed. Also, the three major facets of leadership, operational, instructional, and

parent and family engagement, were examined to see which of the areas each teacher lacked skills in.

Being reflective, consistently looking for different perspectives, and promoting reflection in others were mentioned by the current administrators as essential attributes for an assistant principal to have. They also discussed that it comes with time; the longer they have been in leadership, the easier and more innate it becomes to reflect. The teacher leaders began to notice the importance and benefits of reflection as the study progressed.

### **Research Question 2**

The second research question asked about the impact that the teacher leaders felt the pipeline program had on their leadership practices and understanding of roles. The first emergent theme (i.e., understanding expectations and preparedness) was seen 30 times throughout the data, and 15 of those times were in direct response to interview questions that were tied to this research question. Three major facets of school leadership and the interventions in each cycle were discussed in response to this question (i.e., operational, instructional, and parent and family engagement). It was also debated which of the three, if any, was arguably the most important or impactful on a school community.

#### **Operational Leadership**

During the initial interviews, none of the six participants could describe the expectations or practices of operational leadership for the assistant principal position. Yet, by the final interviews, they demonstrated a positive impact on their understanding of the role of operational leadership and their leadership practice.

Ms. Spears spoke about operational leadership as being the “glue that ties everything together in a school” or “what is happening behind the scenes to make things run smoothly.” She

assisted her administrators in an emergency when her school went on lockdown, and the cause was initially unknown. She saw that her principal and assistant principal were “quick on their feet” and “remained cool, calm, and collected throughout the whole process.” She later debriefed with them about their demeanor and stated that she was not sure she would be able to be that relaxed in the same situation. Her assistant principal shared that, like many things in leadership, her composure “came with time and practice.” To her, she mentioned that this may be the most important part of leadership as the “safety of the students and staff need to be at the forefront.”

During her final interview, Ms. Heard discussed that she felt she still had no operational leadership experience. However, at the study's conclusion, she better understood what it meant to be “that type of leader.” As the primary researcher used to be her assistant principal, she mentioned that she did not previously realize all that went into that part of the job. However, now that they have discussed the seriousness and difficulty of some of those tasks and how much time some take to complete, she has “more of an appreciation” for the position. She discussed that “properly managing Title I and Title III funds, complying with district, state, and federal guidelines, and ensuring a safe learning environment for staff and students” are essential parts of this part of leadership. The primary researcher and her worked out a plan for her to gain some experience with a mentor with some of these tasks.

### **Instructional Leadership**

All the participants had responses to what they believed instructional leadership looked like in a school setting at the initial interviews. Some even provided examples of their current experience in that area. However, all could expound upon their answers at the study's conclusion.

As a high school teacher, Ms. Love said:

I think of this as supporting teachers in reaching their own professional goals but also

addressing needs and trends in instructional practices and student outcomes across the school. I have one summer of experience coaching corps members or new teachers as well as three summers as an instructional facilitator with Teach for America. I have also been [a professional learning community] lead and digital learning team liaison [at my school.]

She said she wanted to learn more about the root causes of instructional needs (i.e., knowledge gaps, skill gaps, mindset issues, or capacity issues) and “address that in coaching or professional development.” By the end of the study, she said, “During this semester, I participated in instructional walks with the leadership team, and afterward, we analyzed data to determine professional learning opportunities for teachers.” She also mentioned that she brought up the question of root causes to her leadership team, and many stated they had not considered it before but were able to have a healthy debate on the topic.

Mr. Holmes had a different viewpoint and originally stated, “Instructional leadership to me is first understanding what I am doing, then sharing that knowledge with others and helping them understand what they are doing. To me, it is about lifting others up.” He arguably gained the most experience in this area throughout the study. By the end, he shared:

Instructional leadership involves guiding educators in effective teaching practices, fostering a positive learning environment and promoting a collaborative school culture focused on student success. My experiences now include implementing best practices in the form of protocols that help collaborative teams and move students toward their goals, as well as allowing them to own their data. Throughout the semester, I was fortunate enough to assist my administrators with analyzing schoolwide and classroom-specific data to determine teacher and student needs, facilitate data-driven instructional processes

and protocols with teacher teams and the faculty at large, plan and execute professional development, and follow up support focused on instructional practices. I also worked with the academic coaches to implement professional learning cycles based on a needs assessment that impacted student learning and teacher development.

He attributed his large gain in knowledge and experience in this area to having a very open administration willing to mentor him and allow him to shadow regularly.

### **Parent and Family Engagement**

While five out of six participants said that the intervention in the third action research cycle allowed them to gain experience in parent and family engagement, the majority still were unsure how to continue working on this concept outside their classrooms' walls.

Ms. Battle knew when the study commenced that “leadership related to stakeholder engagement looks like understanding, engaging with, and maximizing the relationships with stakeholders to bring about positive change for the school community.” She had some experience when teaching in another state but none outside her classroom in her current school. During her final interview, she said:

Leadership related to parent and family engagement looks like fostering collaboration between parents, teachers, students, and the community to plan for and create the best learning space for students and cultivate relationships that build a strong connection focused on student achievement. This relationship helps with the creation of a shared vision, the development of effective decision-making processes, as well as a means for addressing concerns efficiently to promote both academic success and a positive school culture. This semester, I was able to observe my principal coordinate school-based programming with community agencies, collaborate with other school leaders to lead and

support wrap-around services for not only the students, but the parents and families. My principal moderated difficult conversations to improve the school to home connection to have a positive impact on school culture and student learning. While I wasn't able to gain much experience in this area, I think this interests me the most, especially with the community we serve; they could use a lot of support.

Ms. Battle and three other participants agreed that the aspiring leadership program “opened [their] eyes to areas and avenues of parent and family engagement that [they] hadn't thought about before.” They also “appreciated learning and hearing from current leaders in the cluster and the other participants in the study about what is being done at their schools in [the area of the study].”

### **Research Question 3**

The third research question asked what the members of the ARDT and ARIT learned throughout the implementation of this program. It was discussed if action research team members believed that a program like this should be adopted by the school district in which the study took place, remain solely in the Southern Magnolia cluster, or not continue at all. In addition, the team members discussed modifications made along the way as part of the action research cycles.

Throughout their meetings, the ARDT, apart from the primary researcher, discussed that they were surprised by the lack of operational knowledge the participants had and felt that, in the future, this area needs to be more heavily covered for aspiring leaders. The primary researcher, being the “closest to the classroom,” in that she has the least amount of leadership experience, recalled how difficult it was to get real-world, on-the-job experience in operational leadership while still a full-time teacher. About halfway through the first cycle, which focused heavily on

that facet of leadership, the ARDT brainstormed ways to allow the participants more experience. However, it was mentioned that if this study was recreated or a program such as this was to continue, the leaders enacting the program would be sure to have a greater buy-in from the participating mentors and guidance, including a timeline and checkpoints for them to meet with their mentees.

The ARDT also learned that more district support is needed to improve parent and family engagement in the Southern Magnolia cluster, especially with the many Spanish speakers. It was discussed that while the program's participants tried to increase engagement at their schools in the third cycle, they were faced with not speaking Spanish themselves. Although they had documents translated into Spanish, several parents were illiterate in Spanish and English and needed audio messages. It was realized that the cluster leaders need to get together with parent leaders in the area to see how they would like to be communicated with. It was suggested that the study participants help form a group of teacher leaders to spearhead this initiative to gain more experience in this area.

The ARIT members' answers to this question aligned well with the emergent themes. They discussed conflict resolution and communication skills, the importance of building relationships and collaboration, and being resourceful and able to "triage" tasks as they "come at you." Ms. Love said:

So far, I have learned more about the expectations for school leaders as well as the importance of balancing prior experiences with the shifts that have occurred in education over the past few years. I have also learned how to quantify my work in order to maximize my impact and make myself more marketable when I am ready to apply for a job as an assistant principal.

## Chapter Summary

The first research question focused on the development of aspiring assistant principals and identified vital skills crucial for their advancement in educational leadership. Several themes emerged through various methods, such as interviews and observations. Clear communication was highlighted as foundational for fostering trust and collaboration among stakeholders while building relationships and fostering collaboration were deemed essential for achieving common goals. Additionally, flexibility, adaptability, support, and mentorship were identified as critical traits for navigating change effectively and fostering continuous learning and growth in leadership roles within educational settings.

The second research question explored the transformative effects of an aspiring assistant principals' academy on teacher leaders' comprehension and performance of various leadership roles within schools. The program's impact was investigated across operational, instructional, and parent and family engagement leadership facets. Participants demonstrated an evolution in understanding operational leadership, progressing from uncertainty to proficiency and recognizing its pivotal role in maintaining school functionality and safety. Similarly, instructional leadership saw participants embracing comprehensive strategies such as data-driven decision-making and professional development initiatives facilitated by mentorship and institutional support. Parent and family engagement challenges were identified, with participants expressing aspirations to leverage program insights for fostering meaningful initiatives and strengthening school-family bonds.

Lastly, the third research question focused on the learnings of two action research teams during the program's implementation. Discussions centered on modifications made during action research cycles, with suggestions for comprehensive coverage of operational knowledge and

increased district support for parent and family engagement, particularly within Spanish-speaking communities. The importance of conflict resolution, communication skills, relationship building, and resourcefulness in school leadership was emphasized, alongside the need to balance prior experiences with recent educational shifts to enhance career opportunities.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONNECTIONS TO LEADERSHIP PRACTICE**

This chapter mainly focuses on leadership practice and policy implications from the qualitative action research-based case study findings. The themes and connections to each research question will be discussed, as well as ideas for further research and concluding thoughts.

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to improve a leadership development program for aspiring assistant principals in an urban school cluster.

#### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What leadership behaviors do teachers in an aspiring leadership program identify as supportive in building their leadership capacity?
2. How did the aspiring leadership program participants describe the program's impact on their practice and understanding of leadership roles?
3. What did the action research team members learn through the process of implementing an aspiring leadership program?

#### **Summary of the Study**

This action research study took place in the fall semester of the 2023-2024 school year in the Southern Magnolia cluster of a large urban school district about 10 miles northeast of a major

southeastern city in the United States. The study included two teachers from Anise Elementary School, two teachers from Sweetbay Middle School, and two teachers from Loebner High School. All teachers were teacher leaders aspiring to be assistant principals. This research consisted of a qualitative case study and examined the impact of improving a leadership development program for aspiring assistant principals. The study consisted of three action research cycles, all with interventions. One focused on operational leadership, one on instructional leadership, and one on parent and family engagement to ensure that the ARIT or participants came out of the program with more well-rounded leadership skills than when they began. The ARDT assisted the researcher in the development of the interventions and in analyzing the findings.

### **Theoretical Framework and Theory of Change**

This study utilized the lens of leadership development and succession planning. Based on Groves' (2007) theory of leadership development and succession planning, there are five major factors: developing mentoring relationships, identifying leadership talent, developing leadership skills, making succession decisions, and reinforcing an organizational culture of leadership development. Those themes are cyclically related to one another.

Jarvis (2019) described succession planning as “the process of developing leadership talent to meet the current and future strategic needs of the organization... [and involving] the strategic management of the flow of talent through an organization by creating and maintaining a talent pipeline” (p. 222). Companies like General Electric, Exxon, 3M, and Home Depot have followed this model and created leadership development programs in which managerial staff learn how to mentor more novice staff and develop them into leaders through mentoring and education (Groves, 2007). They have learned that it is imperative for organizations to continually

develop leaders and build their leadership pipeline (i.e., build their bench) to attain short and long-term goals shaped by their mission and vision. It was found that it is essential to have a pipeline that can build on previous success (Salleh & Rahman, 2017; Gothard & Austin, 2013; Groves, 2007).

This action research study aimed to assist teachers who were aspiring assistant principals on their leadership journeys and prepare them for the next level. A study such as this was needed in the school district where this occurred, which no longer has its own leadership pipeline program as of recent years. They continued to have programs to assist novice assistant principals, principals, and district leaders but no longer had programs for preparing aspiring leaders. Through the cyclical nature of the continuous improvement logic model, discussion occurred on whether professional learning sessions were enough to prepare aspiring leaders or if job-embedded preparation activities were also needed.

### **Action Research Study**

This action research study focused on building the capacity of aspiring leaders in one urban school cluster through professional development that included shadowing, mentoring, and creating a school leader pipeline. The Southern Magnolia cluster's aspiring assistant principal program aimed to prepare future leaders to lead for student success. The ARDT consisted of the primary researcher and five additional school and district leaders. This group of leaders provided a wide range of instructional and operational knowledge and information on the requirements of a new assistant principal in the cluster and district. The ARIT was comprised of six teacher leaders in the cluster: two from elementary school, two from middle school, and two from high school.

Throughout the study, the ARDT held bi-monthly meetings, collected and recorded data, and reflected upon and analyzed the data. The team also had a focus group of school and district leaders at the beginning of the study to discuss what they believed were the requirements of an assistant principal in the district and to inform the program's direction. The ARIT members participated in two interviews, one at the beginning and one at the end of the study, as an intake and wrap-up. There was a professional development session once a month that lasted about 90 minutes and focused on the themes in the leadership standards from the state. They completed two feedback questionnaires to discuss the program and participated in two mentoring and coaching meetings.

### **Importance of Teacher Leaders as Participants**

According to Barth (2001), teacher leaders are veteran teachers who are “school-based reformers [and] become owners and investors in the school” (p. 443). Teacher leaders also consistently add to their craft by furthering their instructional knowledge with research-based methods and fostering a sense of collaboration and mentorship among the teaching community (Barth, 2001). Teacher leaders bridge the gap between the classroom and administration. While some teacher leaders serve outside the classroom (i.e., MTSS specialists and academic coaches), they still work intimately with those in traditional classroom teaching roles. Other teacher leaders, while still being classroom teachers, also serve in roles such as grade level chair, team lead, or department chair.

It was essential to have teacher leaders as the participants in the ARIT because to understand what is required of an assistant principal, one needs to understand what it is like to serve in a coaching and mentoring role over other teachers. Serving in one of those roles, or something similar, is also required to be selected to interview for an assistant principal position

in the district. However, the aspiring leadership program in the study focused on the move from leading teachers as peers to leading teachers and staff as subordinates and how different and sometimes complex that transition can be.

### **Discussion of the Findings**

Several significant findings emerged in the action research case study focused on an aspiring assistant principal program where teacher leaders gained theoretical and practical school leadership experience. The study revealed that the program played a crucial role in the professional development of teacher leaders, equipping them with the knowledge and skills required for effective school leadership. Participants reported a heightened sense of confidence in their leadership abilities and a deeper understanding of the complexities of educational administration. Moreover, the program's hands-on approach, which included opportunities to shadow and collaborate with experienced school leaders, was found to be particularly effective in bridging the gap between theory and practice. This highlights the importance of experiential learning in leadership preparation programs (Education et al., 2023; Gates et al., 2020; Palmer, 2019; Ruggirello, 2024).

The case study also highlighted the program's positive impact on the broader school community. Teacher leaders who participated in the program were seen as more credible and influential within their schools, leading to increased collaboration and a more dynamic learning environment. Furthermore, the findings emphasized the need for ongoing support and mentorship for teacher leaders transitioning into formal leadership roles, ensuring their long-term success as assistant principals (Education et al., 2023; Gates et al., 2020; Ruggirello, 2024). Overall, this action research case study underscores the importance of such programs in nurturing and preparing the next generation of educational leaders while positively influencing

the school culture and student outcomes, thereby contributing to the continuous improvement of educational institutions.

### **Connections to Leadership Practice**

The aspiring assistant principals pipeline program researched in this study incorporated instructional and operational leadership duties and engagement with parents and families. It was designed to prepare participants for the multifaceted role of an assistant principal in the district. The implementation of the program connected to school leadership practice in several key ways:

1. **Instructional Leadership:** Aspiring assistant principals are needed to develop strong instructional leadership skills. By participating in this program, they gained knowledge in teacher evaluation and pedagogical leadership. This direct involvement in the instructional process equipped them with the knowledge and skills required to support and enhance teaching and learning in their future leadership roles.
2. **Operational Leadership:** Assistant principals are responsible for the day-to-day operations of a school. By having participants learn about operational leadership duties, such as managing school resources, scheduling, and ensuring a safe and productive learning environment, the program helped them understand the practical aspects of running a school efficiently. This experience is crucial for effective school management.
3. **Parent and Family Engagement:** Building solid relationships with parents and families is fundamental to effective school leadership. Aspiring assistant principals engage with parents and families, which is vital for fostering a positive school culture and ensuring parents are involved in their children's education. This engagement also aided participants in understanding the broader community context in which the school operates.

4. **Connecting Theory to Practice:** The program bridged the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. It allowed participants to apply educational leadership theories and concepts in real-world situations. This connection is vital for developing leadership competence, ensuring participants can translate their knowledge into action.
5. **Preparation for Assistant Principal Role:** Ultimately, the program was designed to prepare individuals for the role of assistant principal. By engaging in instructional leadership, operational management, and community engagement, participants gained a comprehensive understanding of the assistant principal's responsibilities, intending to make them well-equipped to step into the role confidently.
6. **Professional Networking:** Through their engagement with parents, families, teachers, and other school stakeholders, participants built a network of connections that can be invaluable in their future leadership roles. This network can provide support, resources, and insights to help them succeed as assistant principals.

In summary, the program integrated various elements of school leadership, preparing participants for their challenges and responsibilities. The program provided a well-rounded, experiential education encompassing instructional leadership, operational management, and community engagement, all essential components of effective school leadership (Education et al., 2023; Gates et al., 2020; Palmer, 2019; Ruggirello, 2024).

### **Research Question 1**

The research delved into the development of aspiring assistant principals and the key skills crucial for their advancement in educational leadership. Several vital themes emerged through interviews, focus groups, and observations. Clear communication stood out as vital,

highlighted by experienced leaders as foundational for fostering trust and collaboration among stakeholders, ensuring shared visions, and goal achievement.

Building relationships and fostering collaboration were deemed essential for assistant principals, emphasizing the power of teamwork and collective effort in achieving common goals. Flexibility and adaptability were also critical traits, allowing leaders to navigate change effectively and remain responsive to evolving needs.

Support and mentorship were identified as central to leadership growth, providing a nurturing environment for talent development and continuous learning. Reflection emerged as a vital leadership trait, promoting continuous improvement and personal growth. Overall, the study emphasized the significance of clear communication, relationship-building, adaptability, support, and reflection in fostering effective leadership within educational settings.

### **Research Question 2**

This research question delved into the transformative effects of the aspiring assistant principals' academy on teacher leaders' comprehension and performance of various leadership roles within a school environment. The study investigated the program's impact on operational, instructional, and parent and family engagement leadership facets. Operational leadership, which initially confused the participants, gradually emerged as a foundation of school management by ensuring safety protocols, adhering to regulatory guidelines, and accurately managing resources. Notably, participants progressed from a state of uncertainty regarding operational responsibilities to demonstrating understanding and proficiency by the program's conclusion. This evolution was evidenced through narratives highlighting experiences such as aiding administrators during emergencies, which underscored the pivotal role of operational leadership in maintaining the school's functionality and safeguarding its students and staff members.

Conversely, instructional leadership revealed data about the support of educators, the development of a conducive learning environment, and the facilitation of collaborative efforts to enhance student achievement. As participants navigated this facet of leadership, their perspectives progressed from more simplistic definitions to embracing comprehensive strategies encompassing data-driven decision-making, professional development initiatives, and fostering a culture of shared accountability. This progression was fostered by mentorship opportunities and institutional support, enabling participants to leverage instructional leadership for transformative pedagogical practices and student-centered learning experiences.

Furthermore, exploring parent and family engagement revealed a connection between untapped potential and inherent challenges. While participants recognized the importance of forging strong school-community partnerships, they grappled with translating this awareness into actionable strategies beyond the confines of the classroom. The intricate dynamics of stakeholder collaboration, shared vision, and effective communication emerged as focal points for participants, reflecting their aspirations for cultivating inclusive learning environments with diverse community needs. Despite encountering obstacles in this domain, participants expressed a newfound interest in leveraging the program's insights to explore innovative avenues for fostering meaningful parent and family engagement initiatives, recognizing the vital role of creating well-rounded student development and strengthening school-family bonds.

The research demonstrated the influence on teacher leaders' understanding and enacting diverse leadership roles within educational contexts. From navigating operational management to supporting instructional innovation and fostering community engagement, participants' journeys highlighted the dynamic relationship between professional development initiatives and organizational efficacy in shaping school communities.

### **Research Question 3**

The data for this question explored what members of the two action research teams learned during the program's implementation. They deliberated on whether such a program should be adopted district-wide, confined to the specific cluster, or discontinued. Discussions centered on modifications made during the action research cycles. The majority of the ARDT members noted participants' limited operational knowledge and advocated for more comprehensive coverage of this concept for aspiring leaders. The primary researcher emphasized the challenge of gaining operational leadership experience while being a full-time teacher. Suggestions included providing participants with more hands-on experience, ensuring greater buy-in from mentors, and structured support.

In addition, the ARDT identified the need for increased district support to enhance parent and family engagement, particularly within the Spanish-speaking community. Despite efforts to boost engagement, language barriers and literacy issues hindered progress. Suggestions included collaborating with parent leaders to determine effective communication methods and forming a group of teacher leaders to lead this initiative. On the other hand, the ARIT members highlighted the importance of conflict resolution, communication skills, relationship building, and resourcefulness in school leadership. They emphasized the need to balance prior experiences with recent educational shifts and quantify their work to enhance their marketability for future career opportunities.

### **Implications for School and District Leaders**

The study's findings align with the reviewed literature and speak to the importance of a program such as the one implemented in the research. The most successful school leadership pipeline programs combined coursework or professional development sessions with practical

application and included things such as shadowing, mentoring, and coaching to provide real-world, on-the-job experiences for aspiring leaders (Bickmore et al., 2021; Cunningham & Sherman, 2008; Dickens et al., 2021; Education et al., 2023; Gates et al., 2020; Levine, 2005, as cited in Jamison et al., 2020; McManus, 2017; Palmer, 2019; Ruggirello, 2024; Service et al., 2016; Thessin & Clayton, 2013; Turnbull et al., 2013a).

Without this study, the district lacks an assistant principal pipeline program at the district, regional, or local school level. In addition, outside of the job description that the district has for the assistant principal position, which includes job functions and educational and professional requirements, there is no published profile of what an exemplary applicant looks like, according to school and district leadership. The job functions stated are somewhat vague (i.e., providing “administrative and supervisory support to the principal,” assisting with “planning, implementation, and coordination of curriculum and all instructional and non-instructional programs,” monitoring the “discipline of students in accordance with school system procedures,” conducting “staff evaluations,” coordinating “full-time equivalent (FTE) processes,” and serving “as local site standardized test administrator”) (*Position Specification*, 2019, p. 1). An applicant in the district must also have at least three years of teaching experience, a master’s degree in education, and hold or be eligible for leadership certification in the state (*Position Specification*, 2019).

Through the use of a leadership focus group, school and district leaders, as well as the ARDT, were able to hone in on what skills they believe are necessary to be an effective assistant principal in the district, as well as what the best ways are to support aspiring school leaders. Additionally, the ARIT members participated in a final interview. They discussed the program’s impact on their leadership capabilities and what they learned through the implementation of the

aspiring leadership program. They also discussed the three critical areas of school leadership (i.e., instruction, operations, and parent and family engagement) and what skills they acquired in each area because of the program from the professional development sessions, mentoring, and interventions. All this information could potentially create a profile for the ideal candidate for a new assistant principal position in the district.

Furthermore, school and district leaders could create similar pipeline programs at the school or district level. Through these discussions, a comprehensive profile of the ideal candidate for a new assistant principal position within the district could potentially emerge. Moreover, this valuable insight could inspire the creation of similar pipeline programs at both the school and district levels, fostering a continuous cycle of leadership development and support (Education et al., 2023).

### **Implications for Policy**

While this research found minimal, if any, implications for state or national policy regarding educational leadership, the state Code of Ethics for Educators, as well as educational leadership certification requirements, were discussed. Participants discussed the 10 codes in the state ethics policy and the tiered system for educational leadership certification (State Department of Education, 2021a; State Department of Education, 2023). In addition, the ARDT and ARIT noticed the move from simply “management to instructional leadership” in the school leader role, the need for “embedded professional development” in a pipeline program, as well as “transparency and differentiation” (Zepeda et al., 2009, p. 4). These concepts and contemplating creating a succession plan developed through the completion of a pipeline program could lead to policy changes in the district (Groves, 2009; Zepeda et al., 2009; Pace, 2010).

### **Implications for Further Research**

Based on feedback from the action research teams, it would be beneficial to continue the study or create a yearlong study demonstrating the effectiveness of a pipeline program by showing the number of participants promoted to assistant principal positions by the following school year. The action research teams discussed themes for further research and decided upon the following:

1. Investigating the effectiveness of mentorship programs in developing the leadership skills of aspiring assistant principals and exploring the qualities and strategies of effective members.
2. Comparing different leadership models (i.e., instructional, transformational, servant) in terms of their impact on the capacity building of aspiring assistant principals.
3. Investigating how cultural competency training can enhance the capacity of assistant principals to lead diverse schools and foster inclusive environments.
4. Exploring the importance of stakeholder engagement in the capacity-building process of assistant principals.
5. Analyzing the various leadership styles employed by aspiring assistant principals and their effectiveness in different school contexts.
6. Studying the impact of specific professional development strategies on the growth of aspiring assistant principals' capacities.
7. Examining how changes in education policies and regulations influence the roles and responsibilities of assistant principals and their capacity-building needs.
8. Assessing the role of conflict resolution skills in the effectiveness of assistant principals and their ability to lead through challenging situations.

9. Investigating the importance of feedback mechanisms in the continuous improvement of assistant principals' leadership capacities.
10. Analyzing how effective succession planning contributes to developing and retaining talented assistant principals within the school district.

### **Chapter Summary and Final Thoughts**

Succession planning is something that many major corporations do all the time. However, it is not always discussed in the public sector of education. There are many educational leadership programs, but not all fully combine theory with practice to the extent that an aspiring administrator truly needs. Many believe there needs to be more real-world, on-the-job experiences before applying for a job as an assistant principal. Some have suggested an intern year while out of the classroom. However, several teacher leaders are juggling building their leadership capacity with a full-time teaching job.

Communication skills, conflict resolution, building relationships, and fostering collaboration were seen as the most critical skills for a school leader. Implementing a leadership pipeline program within the school district is essential to enhance building capacity in aspiring assistant principals. The district should create opportunities for aspiring assistant principals to shadow and work closely with experienced administrators who can provide invaluable hands-on experience and mentorship.

Moreover, the district should offer tailored professional development opportunities designed to cultivate the skills and knowledge required for effective school leadership. These programs could include workshops, seminars, and coursework covering topics such as instructional leadership, personnel management, budgeting, and community engagement.

Providing access to relevant resources, such as books, articles, and online modules, can further support their growth and development.

Furthermore, the district should establish formal pathways for career advancement within the leadership pipeline program. This may involve offering promotions based on demonstrated competencies and accomplishments and providing ongoing feedback and support to help aspiring assistant principals progress in their roles. Additionally, creating opportunities for cross-functional collaboration and exposure to different school environments can broaden their perspectives and skill sets.

It's also crucial for the district to foster a culture of continuous learning and reflection among aspiring assistant principals. Encouraging participation in professional learning communities, peer mentoring programs, and reflective practices can help them refine their leadership abilities and stay abreast of emerging educational trends and best practices. Additionally, providing access to networking opportunities, such as conferences and professional associations, can help aspiring assistant principals build connections and learn from others in the field.

The district should evaluate the effectiveness of the leadership pipeline program on an ongoing basis and adjust as needed to ensure its success. This may involve collecting participant feedback, tracking their career progression and impact on school outcomes, and soliciting stakeholder input to identify improvement areas. By investing in the development of aspiring assistant principals through a comprehensive leadership pipeline program, the school district can strengthen its leadership bench and ultimately enhance the quality of education for all students (Education et al., 2023; Gates et al., 2020; Palmer, 2019; Ruggirello, 2024). Lastly, from a

participant who was promoted during the third cycle, a program like this is needed in the district because:

This has impacted my instructional capabilities by providing a safe space for learning how to navigate the challenges that come with leadership by helping to build on the education and experiences I have through opportunities to practice implementing shared strategies. I have been able to focus on academic leadership and attain a position that allows me to work specifically on building capacity in others and improve planning, and instruction in a positive and meaningful way.

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## Appendix A

### Empirical Findings Table

| APA Citation  | Key Findings  |
|---|---|
| <p>Groves, K. (2007). Integrating leadership development and succession planning best practices. <i>Journal of Management Development</i>, 26(3), 239-260.</p>  | <p>Theoretical Framework: Based on Groves' (2007) theory of leadership development and succession planning, there are five major factors: developing mentoring relationships; identifying leadership talent; developing leadership skills; making succession decisions; and reinforcing an organizational culture of leadership development. Those themes are related to one another in a cyclical fashion.</p> |
| <p>Moen, R., &amp; Norman, C. (2006). Evolution of the PDCA cycle. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1.1.470.5465">https://doi.org/10.1.1.470.5465</a></p>  | <p>Logic Model: Moen and Norman (2006) discuss Deming's (1993) Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) continuous improvement cycle went through many stages before becoming what it is known as today. It has ties back to Galileo's philosophy of science and Shewart's scientific method.</p>   |
| <p>Hauge, T. E., Norenes, S. O., &amp; Vedøy, G. (2014). School leadership and educational change: Tools and practices in shared school leadership development. <i>Journal of Educational Change</i>, 15(4), 357–376.<br/><a href="https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-014-9228-y">https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-014-9228-y</a></p> | <p>Definition of an Aspiring School Leader: Aspiring school leaders need to learn how to switch from “plant manager to leaders of instruction” (Hauge et al., 2014, p. 359).</p>  |
| <p>Barth, R. S. (2001). Teacher leader. <i>The Phi Delta Kappa</i>, 82(6), 443–449.<br/><a href="http://www.jstor.org/stable/20439932">http://www.jstor.org/stable/20439932</a></p>   | <p>Teacher Leaders: Teacher leaders “experience personal and professional satisfaction, a reduction of isolation, a sense of instrumentality, and new learnings – all of which spill over into their teaching. As school-based reformers, these teachers become owners and investors in the school, rather than tenants” (Barth, 2001, p. 443).</p>   |
| <p>Jamison, K., Clayton, J., &amp; Thessin, R. (2020). Utilizing the educational leadership mentoring framework to analyze intern and mentor dynamics during the administrative internship <a href="https://doi.org/10.1080/13611267.2020.1859328">https://doi.org/10.1080/13611267.2020.1859328</a></p>                        | <p>Graduate Certification Courses: Jamison et al., (2020) found that "university preparation programs in educational administration and leadership came under scrutiny in 2005, following Arthur</p>  |

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|  | Levine's 2005 report on the status of such programs. Levine stated, 'The findings of this report were very disappointing. Collectively, educational administration programs are the weakest of all the programs at the nation's education schools. This is distressing not only because of the magnitude of the jobs that principals and superintendents must perform, but also because of the large number of school leaders who will need to be hired in the next decade'" (p. 578). |
| Daniëls, E., Hondeghem, A., & Dochy, F. (2019). A review on leadership and leadership development in educational settings. <i>Educational Research Review</i> , 27, 110–125.<br><a href="https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2019.02.003">https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2019.02.003</a>  | In-service Professional Development: In-service professional development is seen as formal training which includes "lectures, trainings, workshops, and courses" while one is currently working in a professional setting (Daniëls, 2019, p. 119).   |
| Service, B., Dalgic, G. E., & Thornton, K. (2016). Implications of a shadowing/mentoring programme for aspiring principals. <i>International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education</i> , 3, 253.  | Shadowing: As stated in Service et al., (2016), "shadowing is defined as a peer-related professional development activity in which an aspirant principal is placed with a host practicing principal for a period of time. Shadowing is on-the-job learning, career development and leadership development intervention" (p. 255).  |
| Monahan, L., Sparbel, K., Heinschel, J., Rugen, K. W., & Rosenberger, K. (2018). Medical and pharmacy students shadowing advanced practice nurses to develop interprofessional competencies. <i>Applied Nursing Research</i> , 39, 103–108.<br><a href="https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apnr.2017.11.012">https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apnr.2017.11.012</a> | Shadowing: Shadowing is often part of a clinical experience, in which students need to complete a certain number of hours to complete a course or certification requirement (Monahan et al., 2018).  |
| Groves, K. (2007). Integrating leadership development and succession planning best practices. <i>Journal of Management Development</i> , 26(3), 239-260.   | Groves, K. (2007). Integrating leadership development and succession planning best practices. <i>Journal of Management Development</i> , 26(3), 239-260.   |
| Jamison, K., Clayton, J., & Thessin, R. (2020). Utilizing the educational leadership mentoring framework to analyze intern and mentor dynamics during the administrative internship<br><a href="https://doi.org/10.1080/13611267.2020.1859328">https://doi.org/10.1080/13611267.2020.1859328</a>   | Mentoring: The most crucial thing in mentorship is the relationship between the mentor and mentee and the cultivation of that relationship throughout the process; trust is essential between the mentor-mentee pair (Jamison et al., 2020).   |

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| <p>Sardar, H. &amp; Galdames, S. (2017). School leaders' resilience: does coaching help in supporting headteachers and deputies? <a href="https://doi.org/10.1080/17521882.2017.1292536">https://doi.org/10.1080/17521882.2017.1292536</a></p>   | <p>Coaching: According to Sardar and Galdames (2017), educational coaching "is one of the aspects of mentoring which focuses on an individual's skill development or improvement" (p. 49).</p>  |
| <p>Jamison, K., Clayton, J., &amp; Thessin, R. (2020). Utilizing the educational leadership mentoring framework to analyze intern and mentor dynamics during the administrative internship <a href="https://doi.org/10.1080/13611267.2020.1859328">https://doi.org/10.1080/13611267.2020.1859328</a></p> | <p>Residency: According to Jamison et al., (2020), "the administrative internship is the culminating capstone experience of an administrator preparation program at the university level, and must provide ample practical experiences for interns to understand what it is to be a school or district-level administrator" (p. 578).</p>   |
| <p>Mendels, P. (2017). Perspective: Building Principal Pipelines: A Job That Urban Districts Can Do. The Wallace Foundation.</p>   | <p>Effective Leadership in High Needs Schools: Effective principals enhance instruction to empower teachers to perform at their best and encourage students' learning (Mendels, 2012).</p>  |
| <p>Rivera-McCutchen, R. L. (2021). "We don't got time for grumblin'": Toward an ethic of radical care in urban school leadership. <i>Educational Administration Quarterly</i>, 57(2), 257-289.</p>   | <p>Effective Leadership in High Needs Schools: Rivera-McCutchen (2021), explains that the leadership can motivate teachers to perform at their best by making them feel respected and safe in the school.</p>   |
| <p>Caliskan, O. (2020). Ecology of social justice leadership: How schools are responsive to refugee students. <i>Multicultural Education Review</i>, 12(4), 267-283.</p>   | <p>Social Justice Leadership and its Effects on School Climate: The concept of social justice translates to the reconstruction of society across the application of the values of equity, inclusion, and recognition, and it has caught the interest of academics, professionals, and legislators as a solution for dealing with social, educational, and economic issues that are present in many different contexts (Caliskan, 2020).</p> |
| <p>DeJear Jr, M. L., Baber, L. D., &amp; Li, R. (2018). Perceptions of data-driven decision making on student success: A study of culture, collaboration, and advocacy among community college leaders. <i>The Community College Enterprise</i>, 24(1), 41-59.</p>                                       | <p>Planning and Assessment: DeJear Jr. et al. (2018) state that institutions marked as educational leaders have shifted from traditional assessment forms to data-driven decision-making (DDDM) practices that inform education activities worldwide.</p>   |
| <p>Peddell, L., Lynch, D., Waters, R., Boyd, W., &amp; Willis, R. (2020). How do principals of high performing schools achieve sustained improvement results? <i>IAFOR Journal of Education</i>, 8(4), 133-149.</p>  | <p>Planning and Assessment: Peddell et al. (2020) state that the sustenance of high results in leading institutions resulted from factors such as the behavior of the school leaders, the use of a strategic approach, and the structure of the improvement programs.</p>   |

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| <p>Myende, P. E., Samuel, M. A., &amp; Pillay, A. (2018). Novice rural principals' successful leadership practices in financial management: Multiple accountabilities. <i>South African Journal of Education</i>, 38(2), 1-11.</p>                | <p>Organizational and Operational Management: Myende et al. (2018) noted that school leadership's independent effort to establish cooperative participation and transparency within financial management through participative management strategy provides a policy and practice with the capacity to develop co-responsibility governance instead of being a pathological problem.</p> |
| <p>Ajayi, K., Gbadamosi, L., Oshodi, O., &amp; Jegede, A. (2019). Assessment of the quality of school managers' development as determinant of their effective operations in primary schools. <i>Education Quarterly Reviews</i>, 2(1), 77-81.</p> | <p>Organizational and Operational Management: Ajayi et al. (2019) report that the quality of school managers' development substantially impacts the schools' operations.</p>   |
| <p>Jung, S. B., &amp; Sheldon, S. (2020). Connecting dimensions of school leadership for partnerships with school and teacher practices of family engagement. <i>School Community Journal</i>, 30(1), 9-32.</p>                                   | <p>Communication and Community Relations: According to Jung and Sheldon (2020), the work of a school principal is naturally complicated and multifaceted, and research shows that their involvement in fostering school-family connections is similarly complicated.</p>   |
| <p>Qaralleh, T. J. (2021). The role of school leaders in promoting community partnership. <i>Asian Journal of University Education</i>, 7(1), 124-133.</p>  | <p>Communication and Community Relations: According to Qaralleh (2021), school leadership is the primary cornerstone around predicating diverse communities' growth.</p>   |

## Appendix B

Figure B1

## LAPS Reference Sheet with Sample Indicators

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <p><b>School Leadership</b></p> <p><b>1. Instructional Leadership</b><br/><i>The leader fosters the success of all students by facilitating the development, communication, implementation, and evaluation of a shared vision of teaching and learning that leads to school improvement.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Articulates a vision and works collaboratively with staff, students, parents, and other stakeholders to develop a mission and programs consistent with the district's strategic plan.</li> <li>Analyzes current academic achievement data and instructional strategies to make appropriate educational decisions to improve classroom instruction, increase student achievement, and improve overall school effectiveness.</li> <li>Uses student achievement data to determine school effectiveness and directs school staff to actively analyze data for improving results.</li> <li>Monitors and evaluates the effectiveness of instructional programs to promote the achievement of academic standards.</li> <li>Possesses knowledge of and directs school staff to implement research-based instructional best practices in the classroom.</li> <li>Provides leadership for the design and implementation of effective and efficient schedules that maximize instructional time.</li> <li>Works collaboratively with staff to identify needs and to design, revise, and monitor instruction to ensure effective delivery of the required curriculum.</li> <li>Provides the focus for continued learning of all members of the school community.</li> </ul>  | <p><b>2. School Climate</b><br/><i>The leader promotes the success of all students by developing, advocating, and sustaining an academically rigorous, positive, and safe school climate for all stakeholders.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Incorporates knowledge of the social, cultural, leadership, and political dynamics of the school community to cultivate a positive academic learning environment.</li> <li>Consistently models and collaboratively promotes high expectations, mutual respect, concern, and empathy for students, staff, parents, and community.</li> <li>Utilizes shared decision-making to build relationships with all stakeholders and maintain positive school morale.</li> <li>Maintains a collegial environment and supports the staff through the stages of the change process.</li> <li>Develops and/or implements a Safe School Plan that manages crisis situations in an effective and timely manner.</li> <li>Involves students, staff, parents, and the community to create and sustain a positive, safe, and healthy learning environment which reflects state, district, and local school rules, policies, and procedures.</li> <li>Develops and/or implements best practices in school-wide behavior management that are effective within the school community.</li> <li>Communicates behavior management expectations regarding behavior to students, teachers, and parents.</li> </ul>  |
| <p><b>Organizational Leadership</b></p> <p><b>3. Planning and Assessment</b><br/><i>The leader effectively gathers, analyzes, and uses a variety of data to inform planning and decision-making consistent with established guidelines, policies, and procedures.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Leads the collaborative development of a shared vision for educational improvement and of a plan to attain that vision.</li> <li>Implements strategies for the inclusion of staff and stakeholders in various planning processes.</li> <li>Supports the district's mission by identifying, articulating, and planning to meet the educational needs of students, staff, and other stakeholders.</li> <li>Works collaboratively to develop and monitor progress toward achieving long- and short-range goals and objectives consistent with the school district's strategic plan.</li> <li>Collaboratively develops, implements, and revises a school improvement plan that results in increased student learning.</li> <li>Collaboratively plans, implements, supports, and assesses instructional programs that enhance teaching and student achievement, and lead to school improvement.</li> <li>Uses research-based techniques for gathering and analyzing data from multiple sources to use in making decisions related to the curriculum and school improvement.</li> <li>Monitors and evaluates the use of diagnostic, formative, and summative assessments to provide timely and accurate feedback to students and parents, and to inform instructional practices.</li> <li>Uses assessment information in making recommendations or decisions that are in the best interest of the learner/school/district.</li> <li>Assesses, plans for, responds to, and interacts with the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context that affects schooling based on relevant evidence.</li> </ul> | <p><b>Human Resources Leadership</b></p> <p><b>5. Human Resources Management</b><br/><i>The leader fosters effective human resources management through the selection, induction, support, and retention of quality instructional and support personnel.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Screen, recommends, and assigns highly qualified staff in a fair and equitable manner based on school needs, assessment data, and local, state, and federal requirements.</li> <li>Supports formal building-level employee induction processes and mentoring procedures to support and assist all new personnel.</li> <li>Provides opportunities for professional growth in leadership and continual improvement for all staff.</li> <li>Manages the supervision and evaluation of staff in accordance with local, state, and federal requirements.</li> <li>Supports professional development and instructional practices that incorporate the use of achievement data, and results in increased student progress.</li> <li>Effectively addresses barriers to teacher and staff performance and provides positive working conditions to encourage retention of highly-qualified personnel.</li> <li>Makes appropriate recommendations relative to personnel transfer, retention, and dismissal in order to maintain a high performing faculty.</li> <li>Recognizes and supports the achievements of effective teachers and staff and provides them opportunities for increased responsibility.</li> </ul> <p><b>6. Teacher/Staff Evaluation</b><br/><i>The leader fairly and consistently evaluates school personnel in accordance with state and district guidelines and provides them with timely and constructive feedback focused on improved student learning.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Has a thorough understanding of the teacher and staff evaluation systems and understands the important role evaluation plays in teacher development.</li> <li>Provides support, resources, and remediation for teachers and staff to improve job performance.</li> <li>Documents deficiencies and proficiencies and provides timely formal and informal feedback on strengths and weaknesses.</li> <li>Evaluates performance of personnel using multiple sources consistent with district policies and maintains accurate evaluations.</li> <li>Makes recommendations related to promotion and retention consistent with established policies and procedures and with student learning as a primary consideration.</li> <li>Involves teachers and staff in designing and implementing best practices based on evaluation results which improve instructional practice leading to increased student achievement.</li> </ul> <p><b>Professionalism and Communication</b></p> <p><b>7. Professionalism</b><br/><i>The leader fosters the success of students by demonstrating professional standards and ethics, engaging in continuous professional development, and contributing to the profession.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Models respect, understanding, sensitivity, and appreciation.</li> <li>Works within professional and ethical guidelines to improve student learning and to meet school, district, state, and federal requirements.</li> <li>Maintains a professional appearance and demeanor.</li> <li>Maintains self-efficacy to staff.</li> <li>Maintains confidentiality and a positive and forthright attitude.</li> <li>Provides leadership in sharing ideas and information with staff and other professionals.</li> <li>Works in a collegial and collaborative manner with other leaders, school personnel, and other stakeholders to promote and support the vision, mission, and goals of the school district.</li> <li>Demonstrates the importance of professional development by providing adequate time and resources for teachers and staff to participate in professional learning (i.e., peer observation, mentoring, coaching, study groups, learning teams).</li> <li>Evaluates the impact professional development has on the staff/school/district improvement and student achievement.</li> <li>Assumes responsibility for own professional development by contributing to and supporting the development of the profession through service as an instructor, mentor, coach, presenter and/or researcher.</li> <li>Remains current with research related to educational issues, trends, and practices.</li> <li>Maintains a high level of technical and professional knowledge.</li> <li>Fulfills contractual obligations and assigned duties in a timely manner, participates in other meetings and activities in accordance with district policy.</li> </ul> <p><b>8. Communication and Community Relations</b><br/><i>The leader fosters the success of all students by communicating and collaborating effectively with stakeholders.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Plans for and solicits staff, parent, and stakeholder input to promote effective decision-making and communication when appropriate.</li> <li>Disseminates information to staff, parents, and other stakeholders in a timely manner through multiple channels and sources.</li> <li>Involves students, parents, staff and other stakeholders in a collaborative effort to establish positive relationships.</li> <li>Maintains visibility and accessibility to students, parents, staff, and other stakeholders.</li> <li>Speaks and writes in an explicit and professional manner to students, parents, staff, and other stakeholders.</li> <li>Provides a variety of opportunities for parent and family involvement in school activities.</li> <li>Collaborates and networks with colleagues and stakeholders to effectively utilize the resources and expertise available in the local community.</li> </ul> |

Note. From State Department of Education. (2014, July 1). *LAPS Reference Sheet with Sample*

*Indicators.*

## Appendix C

### Participant Application Questions

1. First name
2. Last name
3. School
4. Current position
5. Number of years in education
6. Number of years at current school
7. Number of years in district
8. Why do you want to be an assistant principal?
9. What experience do you have as a school leader?
10. What are your leadership aspirations in addition to or beyond assistant principal?
11. What do you hope to gain from this program?
12. Attach a current resume.
13. Attach a letter of recommendation from your current principal.
14. Attach your current certificate.

## **Appendix D**

### **Interview Protocols**

#### *Initial Interview Questions*

1. What do you believe will be helpful in supporting your leadership journey? – RQ1
2. What does instructional leadership look like to you and what experience do you have? – RQ2
3. What does operational leadership look like to you and what experience do you have? – RQ2
4. What does leadership related to stakeholder engagement look like to you and what experience do you have? – RQ2
5. How will you determine if the program has had an impact on your leadership capabilities? – RQ2
6. What do you believe you will learn throughout the implementation of this program? – RQ3

#### *Final Interview Questions*

1. What was helpful in supporting your leadership journey? – RQ1
2. What does instructional leadership look like to you and what experience do you have? – RQ2
3. What does operational leadership look like to you and what experience do you have? - RQ2
4. What does leadership related to stakeholder engagement look like to you and what experience do you have? – RQ2
5. Describe the program's impact on your leadership capabilities. – RQ2

6. What did you learn throughout the implementation of this program? – RQ3

*Focus Group Interview Questions*

1. What is the best way to support an aspiring assistant principal? – RQ1
2. What barriers are there to supporting aspiring assistant principals? – RQ1
3. How have you supported aspiring assistant principals? – RQ1
4. What leadership skills do you believe are needed to be an assistant principal in the district? – RQ2
5. What type of impact would you like the program to have? – RQ2, RQ3
6. What are you hoping to learn throughout the implementation of this program? – RQ3

*Feedback Questionnaire Questions*

1. How would you rate the content's impact on your leadership skills so far? Explain. – RQ1, RQ2
2. What have you learned so far regarding being an assistant principal? – RQ2
3. Have your leadership aspirations changed regarding becoming an assistant principal? Why and how? – RQ2
4. What questions do you still have? / What are you still hoping to learn? – RQ3