Leading & Managing

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Editorial

A WORD ABOUT THE NEW L&M

To Our Readers, Researchers, and Prospective Authors

Leading & Managing is a journal published by the Australian Council for Educational Leaders (ACEL). It issued its first edition in 1995, edited by Peter Gronn and Ian Ling. Over the years L&M has the proud history of being the initial publication outlet for so many Australian researchers and practitioners who have gone on to illustrious careers in the profession. Over the years L&M published over 56 editions and 400 articles. A feature of L&M has been special editions with topics such as: Leadership, Gender and Culture; Teacher Leadership; Leading School Improvement; Educational Leadership in Asia Pacific: Contextual and Cultural Lenses; Student Leadership; Leading an Inclusive School, and Leading in Rural and Remote Schools.

In 2023 the ACEL Executive Board and President agreed to expand L&M’s outreach to become more internationalised in its editorial scope and content. Part of that movement was the result of joining with American editors and authors to jointly publish L&M. The impetus was served by a desire to shorten the review process by using the Open Journal System (OJS) which is housed in the U.S. through the Florida Virtual Learning System and the library at Florida Gulf Coast University in Ft. Myers, Florida.

The new L&M also has a retinue of new editorial board members and reviewers. These 60 educators and professors come from across the Globe: Australia, Asia, United States of America, South America, Canada, and the United Kingdom. The board members and reviewers are both experienced academics and up and coming researchers in colleges and universities. They bring a wide range of experience, culture, research traditions, and perspectives to the review process which is truly international in scope.

In its initial deliberations regarding journal content and approach, the co-editors determined to maintain the tradition of being open to all types of research and methods of conducting it. The idea that both leadership and management issues and perspectives would also remain a continuing tradition was also affirmed. In short, the discourse about leading and managing would embrace the widest possible focus, especially perspectives regarding critique and the traditions of criticism in the field. We seek critical engagement because it is through respectful disagreement that we grow as a discipline.

One of the manifestations of this focus is the inclusion in the new L&M of essays on current issues to be included along with the customary research based entries. These essays (to be titled “Commentary”) represent expert opinion on traditional areas of debate in leadership as well as emerging matters of consequence. In this our first issue we include a commentary on the student loan debt crisis by F. King Alexander, formerly a university President in the U.S. who argues that student loan debt crisis involves everyone not just the students. We invite our readers
to submit other pieces of writing that similarly express critical engagement which will move our field towards practical and theoretical advancement.

We provide now an overview of the articles which appear in this issue and comment on their importance.

This issue offers a collection of papers that report research findings related to the implications for leaders, in particular, the impact of work related employment arrangements, and COVID-19 in the academic work space. Also presented are research on leadership programs and leaders professional development. In the first article, Flanagan and Mullen report on research on the psychological capital of second-career teachers who enter the teaching profession and in particular what influences their positive mental states. Findings indicate a strong relationship between their mental states and relationships, especially mentoring and peer support along with the relationship with leaders. The next two articles relate findings on the role of leadership in supporting academic staff in times of uncertainty; Opperman and Carlyon report on impact of internal secondments, while Schaffer, White, Dyke, and Ahmadi explore the impact and implications of COVID-19.

The next three articles focus on professional development. Hall and Mullen’s article’s findings on effective professional development that supports principals as instructional leaders conclude that along with other factors, it is important to ensure that Professional Development is contextual – principal specific. Hughes’s article advocates for Legal Literacy schools for school leaders, while Stork reports on how the use of Universal Design for Learning could be used in educational leadership programs and further its potential to foster more inclusive educational environments.

Fenwick English & Dorothy Andrews

ABOUT THE EDITORS
Presented Alphabetically

Dorothy Andrews is located at the University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba, Australia. She lectures and researches in Leadership and School Improvement. Lecturing includes Educational Leadership, Mentoring and Coaching and Organisational Transformation (Theory and Practice). As Director of the Leadership Research International (LRI) group, the research focuses on school improvement and systems change through processes of organisational capacity building. Dorothy is a director of ICSEI , a Life member of ACEL, and a member of the AARE’s Leadership Sig. Dorothy has been the editor of L&M since 2004. Current research and writing focus are on Systems—School improvement; Principal Capabilities for Leading Schools into the Future; Teacher Leadership and Building organisational capacity for sustainable improvement.
Dr. Krista Bixler is an Assistant Professor and Program Coordinator of the Master of Education and Master of Arts in Educational Leadership in the College of Education at Florida Gulf Coast University in Ft. Myers, Florida. Her research in principal preparation programs and special education has been presented at ICEP, AERA, UCEA, Educational Law Association, CEC, ASCA, EERA, and SRCEA. She earned her B.S., M.Ed., and Ed.D. from the University of Central Florida.

Dr. Joan Conway is an Associate Professor in the School of Education and the Associate Director Research of the Leadership Research International (LRI) at the University of Southern Queensland, Australia. Her research in educational leadership, school improvement processes, capacity building for sustainability of professional learning cultures, and professional learning has been presented at conferences hosted by AARE, ACSEI, ICSEI, and CCEAM, and she is actively engaged in the facilitation of IDEAS (Innovative Designs for Enhancing Achievements in Schools), an R&D school revitalisation project for school improvement. As a Fellow and a Life member of ACEL, she advocates for the professionalism of educational leadership, and is an active proponent of the power of collaborative meaning-making, collective intelligence, and capacity building for sustainability.

Dr. Fenwick English is a Professor and Associate Dean of the College of Education at Florida Gulf Coast University in Ft. Myers, Florida. He is the author or co-author and editor of over 40 books including handbooks, guides, and an encyclopedia of educational leadership and management. He has been the President of UCEA (University Council of Educational Administration) in 2006-7 and NCPEA (now ICPEL) 2011-12, International Council of Professors of Educational Leadership. He has presented his research at AERA, AARE, UCEA, BELMAS, and ICPEL. He was named a Living Legend of the field by ICPEL in 2013. He earned his B.S. and M.S. from the University of Southern California and his Ph.D. from Arizona State University.
The Teacher Psychology of Career Switchers Connected to School Leadership: A Mixed-Methods Study

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ABSTRACT: The problem of teacher retention and satisfaction calls for research on teacher psychology with considerable relevance to school leadership. This mixed-methods study examined the psychological capital (PsyCap) of career switchers in the teaching profession. PsyCap, the conceptual framework used, is a profile encompassing hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism (HERO). The research question was: What is the PsyCap of second-career teachers (SCTs) and what do they believe influences their positive mental states? SCTs in 13 public schools within Virginia, USA, participated through a demographic survey and the Psychological Capital Questionnaire (PCQ-24) (N = 34), followed by interviews (n = 18). This protocol focused on leadership support, mentorship, life experiences, and student behaviour, including effects on PsyCap scores. Quantitative results from the PCQ-24 indicated that components of HERO were accurately reflected in career-switchers’ scores. Qualitative findings from interviews were: (a) PsyCap results accurately reflected individual HERO; (b) mentorship and peer support influenced PsyCap; (c) relationships with colleagues and teams impacted PsyCap; and (d) relationships with leaders affected PsyCap. A study implication is that leaders need to know how to nurture SCTs’ PsyCap. By investigating career switchers’ PsyCap connected to school leadership, a contribution is made to research.

Key words: Career switcher; hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism (HERO); school leadership; second-career teacher (SCT); psychological capital (PsyCap)
Purpose and Overview

The problem of teacher retention and satisfaction calls for research on teacher psychology connected to school leadership. This mixed-methods study examined the psychological capital (PsyCap) of career switchers in the teaching profession. PsyCap is a “general term [for] positive mental states” (hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism [HERO]) (Sun et al., 2022, p. 2) that can be developed, measured, and managed to tackle difficult problems and improve performance (Luthans et al., 2006, 2007). PsyCap is not the same as mindfulness, happiness, and well-being even though these concepts share an affinity that promotes ambiguity at times. Consider that teachers’ PsyCap can influence or predict mindfulness, happiness, well-being, or satisfaction (Sun et al., 2022). While potentially strongly linked to these emotional states, PsyCap is a distinct concept. Yet, in some studies, PsyCap is interchangeable with the other concepts, perhaps owing to their association (Sun et al., 2022). Note that in a survey of 297 Hungarian teachers, “workplace well-being and happiness correlated with [PsyCap], hope and optimism in particular” (Kun & Gadanecz, 2022, p. 185).

Psychological constructs and school leadership are timely topics for study and contribution to research on leading and managing in education. While PsyCap research is established in educational psychology, PsyCap from the career switchers’ perspective in connection with school leadership is new territory in the educational leadership field. Accordingly, we have responded to this gap with an investigation of second-career teachers’ (SCTs) PsyCap that has relevance for principals and other leaders. Even though the literature is robust in the coverage of leadership styles, emotional well-being, attrition, and happiness, career switchers’ PsyCap remains only superficially tapped. Studies that do consider PsyCap (Baeten & Meeus, 2016), teacher self-appraisal and intentions (Troesch & Bauer, 2020), and induction programs tend to overlook SCTs as a standalone population of research interest, as Ruitenburg and Tigchelaar (2021) confirmed. Thus, little is known about the importance of the career-changer phenomenon to school leadership.

Cultivating leaders’ sensibility for the human dimension of their work is underexplored in research, despite hiring trends favouring SCTs. Regarding teacher PsyCap’s connection with school leadership, leaders need to know the unique needs of this beginning teacher group (career switchers) if they are to promote newcomer work satisfaction and retention. School leadership builds and sustains teacher PsyCap, regardless of the situation or context, and leaders need to understand that while some factors contribute to the PsyCap of teachers, other factors damage it. Leadership and organisational support are major dynamics influencing teachers’ intention to stay (Mullen & Fallen, 2022; Mullen & Flanagan, 2023; Mullen et al., 2021). Principals’ encouraging dispositions, behaviours, and actions coupled with positive work conditions enhance teacher PsyCap (Dicke et al., 2020; Helms-Lorenz & Maulana, 2016; Joo et al., 2015; Kun & Gadanecz, 2022; Moon, 2019; Raj et al., 2019). As coresearchers, we assume that teachers’ PsyCap is contingent on leadership investment in and responsibility for developing staff. As such, we consider SCTs’ psychological state at work a pressing issue for school leadership, chiefly in systems still reeling from COVID-19’s harsh impacts. We contend that leaders can mindfully improve their culture by paying attention to teacher PsyCap. Retaining teachers (in the first 3 years) who might otherwise resign is at stake (Ruitenburg & Tigchelaar, 2021).
We were motivated as a middle school assistant principal and an educational leadership professor to use a psychological lens to offer a fresh perspective on old issues—teacher selection, retention, and induction. After noticing an increased hiring of SCTs in schools within our U.S. region, we researched this trend, understanding that developing PsyCap for all staff beyond this newcomer group is ideal. Using surveys and interviews to enrich analyses, the research question was: What is the PsyCap of SCTs and what do they believe influences their positive mental states?

Surprisingly, perhaps, education is not a focus in positive psychology. Consequently, teachers’ and leaders’ conceptions of PsyCap, satisfaction, and happiness are seldom studied (Hughes, 2016)—especially from a solutions approach to satisfaction and well-being—even though employees in education remain highly susceptible to burnout and stress (Collins et al., 2010; Kun & Gadanecz, 2022). Of interest to us is what affects teacher PsyCap at work and leaders’ investment in HERO, as Luthans et al. (2006, 2007) theorised. With reference to a study of teacher expectations of their principals in Turkey, the problem context involving student success at school was explained as “depend[ent] on the performance and compliance [of] teachers and principals” (Aslanargun, 2015, p. 17). Teachers reported that turnover was a result of decreased self-efficacy, resilience, and hope (three of the HERO’s four components) (Joo et al., 2015). Knowing how to foster human qualities/states is consistent with principals’ responsibility for influencing and managing positive attitudes and behaviours (Dicke et al., 2020; Luthans et al., 2006, 2007; Partin, 2022), including the “emotional environment” (Aslanargun, 2015). School principals are expected to support, develop, and retain staff “in a socio-psychological manner”; moreover, the management of public schools is codified “in accordance with laws and regulations” (Aslanargun, 2015, p. 21) directing principals to support employee improvement and self-appraisal and document efforts (e.g., Code of Virginia, 2000).

Psychological constructs (HERO and PsyCap), together with research-informed, actionable strategies for encouraging and measuring satisfaction and happiness, can aid leaders’ performance and their influence (Hughes, 2016).

Quite possibly, school leaders can better support teachers and retain their newcomers with a working understanding of PsyCap on the job, given its strong relationship to satisfaction and happiness for employees (Zhao et al., 2022). However, persistent problems facing principals (staff turnover, budget cuts, etc.) are severe. While the demand is apparent for strong leaders who can transform schools, across US districts teacher turnover is 15 to 30% and more (21%) in high-poverty schools (Buckman & Sloan, 2022).

This article moves to a brief review of literature, which is followed by our conceptual framework and methodology, then findings, discussion, implications for practice, future research directions, and conclusion. As an overview of key findings, quantitative results from the PCQ-24 indicated that components of HERO were accurately reflected in career-switchers’ scores. Qualitative findings from interviews were: (a) PsyCap results accurately reflected individual HERO; (b) mentorship and peer support influenced PsyCap; (c) relationships with colleagues and teams impacted PsyCap; and (d) relationships with leaders affected PsyCap.
Literature Review

Learning Communities and PsyCap

Learning communities improve efficacy, a factor of positive psychology at work (Battersby & Verdi, 2015). Active learning communities decrease staff isolation, increase responsibility, and promote understanding, as well as nurture job satisfaction, commitment, and PsyCap (Helms-Lorenz & Maulana, 2016). Fostering desirable work situations through team building supports teacher confidence and skills development in cross-curricular instruction, student success, and school improvement (Ansley et al., 2019). Cultures of collaboration improve productivity and morale and reduce burnout, conflict, and competition among staff while engendering a cooperative, self-motivated body that contributes to collective goals (Brown et al., 2018). Growth and leadership opportunities, along with targeted PD, are shepherded by effective leaders to encourage teachers to collaborate, communicate, and continue learning (Çobanoğlu & Bozbayindir, 2019; Mullen & Flanagan, 2023).

Mindfulness and PsyCap

Workplace mindfulness is known to improve happiness levels, reduce unwanted feelings, and increase performance (Hanh & Weare, 2017). Practicing mindfulness in a school-wide setting can encourage gratitude, even employee happiness (Moskowitz & Dewaele, 2021). Staff who regularly practiced mindfulness and gratitude reported low(er) stress at work (Hanh & Weare, 2017). Similarly, the happiness scores of teachers with high self-esteem were greater than their peers with low self-confidence (Büyükşahin Çevik, 2017). Counsellors and psychologists are needed to help staff improve their self-efficacy and identify sources of stress and solutions. Optimistic teachers instil hope (İhtiyaroğlu, 2018), potentially enlivening HERO in schools. Learning communities, restorative practices, and PD promote mindfulness in staff (Helms-Lorenz & Maulana, 2016).

Creating Conditions for PsyCap

After interviewing 12 elementary teachers, Hughes (2016) identified a need for school leaders to encourage health and well-being among faculties and children. The teachers described happy schools as having counselling support and social activities, as well as classrooms with energetic pedagogy and activities not burdened by conflicts (scheduling, etc.). Aware or prepared leaders tap into PsyCap for promoting positive environments and outlooks, including a sense of community (Moskowitz & Dewaele, 2021). Conditions that nurture PsyCap are associated with satisfaction, retention, and sustainable cultures. Thus, proactive leadership teams consult research-based evidence to decide which strategies to implement or refine. Reading about teacher profiles and differences; thoughtfully exploring the PsyCap of staff, including leaders and evaluators; and applying practices (we are noting some) can support teachers and their PsyCap development.
Using research-based instruments that allow for self-appraisal, PsyCap can be measured in relation to satisfaction, happiness, and performance. (There might even be value in these instruments for teacher selection and placement, not just retention.) Per workplace studies, employees rated highly on their PsyCap performed better and stayed in the job longer (Luthans et al., 2006; Luthans & Youssef-Morgan, 2017).

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was PsyCap, which is a profile/orientation encompassing hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism (HERO), an integration of four qualities. HERO is a “positive motivational state” involving goal setting and planning (Snyder et al., 1991). (Self-efficacy means believing one can achieve results by working on challenging tasks (Bandura et al., 1999). Resilience is the capacity to recover from adversity to achieve success, as well as the role of supportive, caring cultures for developing resilience (Shields & Mullen, 2020). Optimism implies a hopeful and confident attitude despite setbacks (Kun & Gadanecz, 2022).

As conjectured, PsyCap can be developed and measured. Levels of hope can predict performance related to goals, activities, and coping strategies (Snyder et al., 1991). A person’s PsyCap is subject to change, as per longitudinal studies (Avey et al., 2011; Joo et al., 2015). Not only can the qualities develop, but they can also be affected by personal and external agency and environmental influences—namely, leadership style and support, collegial collaboration, and workplace conditions (Ruitenburg & Tigchelaar, 2021). Importantly, the development of positive PsyCap can enhance positivity and well-being (Luthans & Youssef-Morgan, 2017). Conversely, negative PsyCap shows up as high stress, poor coping skills, absenteeism, cynicism, intentions to quit, and lower job satisfaction (Hanh & Weare, 2017; Moon, 2019). Given that PsyCap is developed and enhanced in supportive collegial settings (Ruitenburg & Tigchelaar, 2021), it is malleable. This opportunity for change calls upon employers to understand why they need to be deliberate in their efforts to guide staff’s professional development (PD) and contributions.

Methodology

This mixed-methods research relied on our demographic survey and the Psychological Capital Questionnaire (PCQ-24), followed by a protocol-guided interview to gain qualitative insight. The PCQ-24 survey measured 34 SCTs’ responses to hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism (PsyCap components). Mixed-methods studies (e.g., Collins et al., 2010) benefited our design and approach.

Participant Introduction to PsyCap

Participants were introduced to PsyCap in our recruitment materials and the PCQ-24. Before their interview, 18 career switchers received a handout describing HERO and PsyCap terminology, as well as their PsyCap scores. The handout was also reviewed during the
individual interview to check for understanding and initiate the first question concerning personal reflections on their survey results. They were prompted to describe what influenced their score in their school environment. Factors that seemed to have a bearing on their scores were then analysed.

**Reliability and Validity**

The justification of the method chosen for this study follows for each of the three data sources. First, PCQ-24’s reliability and validity have been confirmed through extensive trials with professionals inside and outside education, and in different countries (Luthans et al., 2006). Luthans et al.’s (2007) PsyCap-24 measures an individual’s PsyCap using a 24-question Likert-scale that assesses HERO. Informing the items were established measures of hope (Snyder et al., 1991), self-efficacy (Bandura et al., 1999), resilience, and optimism. Survey takers indicate how they think about themselves on items like (a) feeling confident about goal setting, (b) demonstrating the capacity to generate ways to handle a tricky problem, (c) having the ability to move on from setbacks, and (d) expecting the best from murky situations.

Second, our demographic survey questions, which are basic and population specific, were generated through consultation of existing research (citations are in Table 2).

Third, our interview protocol was piloted with a teacher and validated by three educational leadership faculty. Established interview procedures (Creswell & Poth, 2018) were followed.

**Data Collection Process**

**Approvals**

Written permission, via Mind Garden, Inc. on March 5, 2023, was granted to use PCQ-24 (Luthans et al., 2007) in our study (excluding actual survey items in a publication was a condition). Our university’s institutional review board (May 15, 2023, #23-524) and six school divisions in Virginia, USA, granted permission to conduct this research. Recruitment also took place through Virginia Department of Education’s (2023) Career Switcher Program. Data were collected August–October 2023. All SCTs voluntarily participated and signed the consent form.

**Sampling Procedures**

The participant sample was derived from consenting public-school divisions in four suburban and two rural areas of Virginia. The state’s central eastern and northern regions were predetermined to accommodate participants potentially choosing an in-person interview at their preferred location (instead of Zoom). Purposeful sampling was used to identify and select career switchers in relation to the PsyCap phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants completing the questionnaire and interview were SCTs presently teaching in the previously

specified setting. The sampling strategy used for the quantitative portion of this mixed-methods study involved locating a well-established, construct-specific (i.e., PsyCap) questionnaire (PsyCap-24), whereas the qualitative aspect, which followed from the survey, had the objective of discovering how SCTs interpreted their PsyCap-24 scores and associated influences at work.

**Participants**

Recruited by way of a letter, respondents (N = 34) completed the demographic and PsyCap-24 surveys via email. As reported, they were female (20) and male (14), 20–69 years old, with a master’s or bachelor’s degree. They were mainly White (78%) but also Hispanic (6%), Black (6%), Asian (3%), and multiracial (3%). Subjects taught were English (31%), math (26%), science (17%), and history (14%).

Interviewees (n = 18), drawn from the respondent pool, were teaching in middle schools (14), in high schools (3), and in a middle and high school (1). Equally female and male, 14 were White and four Asian, Black, Hispanic, and multiracial. Their prior careers varied (see Table 1).

### Table 1

**Teacher Demographics of Interviewed Career Switchers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Grade Taught</th>
<th>Degree</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Years taught</th>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Prior Career</th>
<th>School Division</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>40–49</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>3+</td>
<td>English, Math, Other</td>
<td>Mortgage banker, insurance sales</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>6, 7, 8</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>50–59</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>3+</td>
<td>History, French</td>
<td>Human resources, nonprofit leader</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>6–8</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>40–49</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>3+</td>
<td>CTE</td>
<td>Interior designer, assistant director in a childcare centre</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>50–59</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Science</td>
<td>Database manager</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>30–39</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Multiracial</td>
<td>3+</td>
<td>Math</td>
<td>Daycare worker, professional mover</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Grade Taught</td>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Race/Ethnicity</td>
<td>Years taught</td>
<td>Subject</td>
<td>Prior Career</td>
<td>School Division</td>
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<td>White</td>
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<td>White</td>
<td>3+</td>
<td>Math, Social Studies</td>
<td>Substitute teacher</td>
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<td>White</td>
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<td>White</td>
<td>3+</td>
<td>Math</td>
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<td>60–69</td>
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<td>3+</td>
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<td>Nonprofit leader</td>
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<td>30–39</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>3+</td>
<td>Math</td>
<td>Instructional aide and behaviour support</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>6–11</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>40–49</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>English, Foreign Language</td>
<td>Videographer, bookkeeper, missionary</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>60–69</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>History</td>
<td>Substance abuse counsellor</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>10–12</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>50–59</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>History, CTE</td>
<td>Law enforcement</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>50–59</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>3+</td>
<td>Science, History, Other</td>
<td>Coast Guard Officer</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>9–12</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>50–59</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>CTE</td>
<td>Pharmacist</td>
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<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>40–49</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Math</td>
<td>Medical interpreter, corporate banking</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: CTE = career and technical education; PE = physical education*
PsyCap-24 Questionnaire

To measure PsyCap according to employment (not individuals’ PsyCap as a whole), on the PsyCap-24 we selected “at work/school” statements. Then 24 SCTs scored themselves on a scale of 1–6 in relation to the 24 items. Statements ranged from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (6). Results were used to rate HERO for each respondent. (To clarify, we are not PCQ-24 consultants.)

Interview

PsyCap scores of HERO and an overall score were shared with the 18 teachers before their individual interview and discussed to promote reflection. All were asked the same questions during the 35–45-minute audio-recorded interview with the first author. Five were interviewed in-person at a school, and 13 chose Zoom. The interview protocol (Table 2) was aligned with relevant studies. Areas of focus were SCTs’ previously attained PsyCap scores and responses, perceived leadership support, mentorship, life experiences, and student behaviour.

Table 2

Semi-structured Interview Protocol for Career Switchers

1. What do you think about your PsyCap survey results? (Avey et al., 2011; Luthans et al., 2006)
2. In your experience as a beginning teacher, what has most affected your PsyCap result? (Luthans & Youssef-Morgan, 2017)
3. In your understanding, what experiences have led to your development of PsyCap?
4. If you had taken the PsyCap survey when you first started, do you think your score would have been the same? Why or why not?
5. Do you believe a teacher’s PsyCap can positively influence them or a student? Please explain.
6. Of the four qualities (psychological states) of HERO, which do you think has had the most impact and why or how?
7. What resources were made available that supported your PsyCap? What did you need that was not offered?
8. Are there any situations at work that negatively affected your PsyCap? Please explain.
9. What would need to be done to increase your PsyCap in a positive way?
10. Do you have anything to add?

Note. Items 3–9 align with various studies (e.g., Kulekci Akyavuz, 2021; Raj et al., 2019).
Data Management and Coding

All interviews were conducted by the first researcher, and Zoom automatically produced a text of the spoken content. In-person interviews were recorded and transcribed using Parrot AI, which converted speech to text using a handheld device. Transcriptions were reviewed for accuracy. For the member checking, 16 interviewees confirmed the transcribed record as is, one made edits, and another added information.

Data from the PCQ-24, demographic survey, and interview were entered into Google sheets. To ensure confidentiality, random numeric codes were assigned, and scores were coded in each of the four HERO areas. Deductive coding (PsyCap, SCT, etc.) and inductive coding (mentorship, misbehaviour, etc.) determined themes in the three data sets. Initial codes were based on the research question, search terms, and studies reviewed, whereas inductive codes emerged. Colour-coding of data aided analysis and theme identification. Both authors and two raters independently coded the data; after comparing results, the research team arrived at 100% interrater reliability.

Findings

PsyCap-24 Quantitative Data Results

SCTs had an overall positive PsyCap, with efficacy as the highest-rated component. Our quantitative analysis revealed that responses varied within the HERO domains, with differences in levels of hope, resilience, and optimism. Scores across domains were averaged to show a complete PsyCap score for each participant. SCTs’ hope scores ranged from a low of 2.3 (for one teacher) to a high of 6 (for five teachers), with an average of 4.83. Efficacy scores ranged from 3.1 for one SCT to 6 (multiple respondents); participants’ average was 4.87. Resilience scores ranged from 3.8 to 5.8 (for three teachers), for an average of 5.02. Optimism scores varied from 3.1 (for one teacher) to 6 (for three teachers), with an average of 4.54. Overall PsyCap-24 scores ranged from 3.30 to 5.9; the average was 4.91. Four teachers scored high across all dimensions, indicating a strong PsyCap. Six scored lower in some domains (e.g., optimism), resulting in a slightly lower overall PsyCap score. Table 3 contains SCTs’ individual scores and the group average in each of the four HERO domains.
### Table 3

**PCQ-24 Surveyed Career Switcher Scores**

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<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Hope</th>
<th>Efficacy</th>
<th>Resilience</th>
<th>Optimism</th>
<th>Overall Score</th>
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*Note.* Asterisks (*) denote interviewees from survey pool.
Qualitative Interview Results

The first finding is for the quantitative results; the remaining three pertain to the qualitative results.

PsyCap Quantitative Results Accurately Reflected Teachers’ Individual HERO (Finding 1)

Based on the survey data, a high average workplace positive PsyCap of 4.8 was accurately reflected. Internal reliability scores for the subscales (HERO) were 0.86 for self-efficacy, 0.85 for hope, 0.72 for resilience, and 0.73 for optimism (Kulekci Akyavuz, 2021; Luthans & Youssef-Morgan, 2017). The overall reliability of the PCQ-24 was 0.91. A higher score on these components indicated that the HERO constructs were more pronounced (e.g., very hopeful).

Regarding PCQ-24 SCT scores, data from the 18 interviews were used to investigate the qualitative influences perceived on SCTs’ PsyCap. Our analysis suggested that five factors at work impacted individuals’ PsyCap scores: mentorship/peer support (16), school climate (15), leadership (13), prior life experiences (13), and extra duties required (12). Handling student problems (8), choosing to be a teacher (8), student–teacher relationships (7), SCT preparation programs (5), PD (4), and compensation (4) also affected scores.

Table 4

Factors Perceived as Influencing PsyCap Scores From Interviews

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<th>T2</th>
<th>T3</th>
<th>T4</th>
<th>T5</th>
<th>T6</th>
<th>T7</th>
<th>T8</th>
<th>T9</th>
<th>T10</th>
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<th>T16</th>
<th>T17</th>
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</table>

*Note: T1, etc. refers to Teacher 1, and so forth.*
Furthermore, PCQ-24 results indicated that the SCTs’ resiliency was high. The explanation SCTs gave was that they had benefited from earlier careers before moving into teaching. Positive student–teacher relationships were also related to their overall hope. Responses further revealed that challenges faced around class size, student misconduct, and disciplinary issues may have reduced their PsyCap. These are examples of creating conditions for PsyCap that were identified in research on teacher attrition (e.g., Ansley et al., 2019).

**Mentorship and Peer Support Influenced SCTs’ Positive PsyCap in the Qualitative Results (Finding 2)**

As reported, the SCTs desired and appreciated proactive mentors, strong communities with peers, and support from leaders (formal mentoring, etc.), which overlaps with the literature reviewed on learning communities and PsyCap. Positive PsyCap at work depended on such connections, which contributed to success. One SCT shared the effect of these relationships:

> You’ve got to have that support system or somebody you trust and can sit with, especially on hard days, and debrief. Having those people who support you and have been around is key to staying. Many teachers stayed at our school because of the community.

Being paired with an effective mentor was invaluable to the development of their PsyCap. Such mentors were described by the SCTs as any teacher who works in the building with them, helps them grow, engages in conversations without judgement, and has a genuine connection with them. Teacher retention and job satisfaction are linked to positive PsyCap (Ansley et al., 2019). PsyCap is built and maintained through good relationships with leaders, mentors, and peers.

Peer relationships also greatly impact SCTs’ PsyCap, as evident from the interview data. These teachers valued a strong school climate that cultivates support and collaboration. Ansley et al. (2019) also discovered that teachers’ positive PsyCap was tied to these factors.

The SCTs expressed a strong sense of camaraderie and support within their school environments. All but one upheld the positive impact of having a mentor, especially during the first few years of teaching. Themes that emerged relative to mentorship were supportive staff, positive mentors and coaches, good relationship with the school team, and collaborating with colleagues. Having a mentor who was absent or ineffective was considered problematic.

Positive mentoring was seen as crucial for SCTs not only for the associated benefits of PD but also for navigating the managerial and policy aspects of teaching (individualised education programs, school-related business, etc.). Formal mentoring programs benefit the development of teacher PsyCap and enhance beginners’ performance, which is similar for SCTs (Tang, 2020). Engaging in meaningful mentoring offers opportunities for mentees to observe proficiency, learn from modelling, and experience higher self-efficacy, all of which enhance PsyCap (Bandura et al., 1999). Interactions with an effective mentor promote high-quality mentorships and the growth of PsyCap (Carter & Youssef-Morgan, 2019).

SCTs also discussed the importance of mentorship in their PD and growth as an educator. A teacher reflected on the impact of their mentor when first teaching: “Having a mentor here at that time was good—I could ask anything and get help.” The SCTs saw value in collaborating
with experienced colleagues to develop teaching skills, which led to practical insights that improved their own pedagogies. One teacher said her mentor was “fantastic”, inviting her to observe pedagogy in action: “I was in my mentor’s class every day. Even though I was teaching [the same content], I wanted to understand the process and see a professional who knew it well.”

Healthy relationships with one’s school team contributed to reassuring second-career teaching experiences, conveyed seven interviewees. The SCTs credited their high PsyCap score to the people in their schools and previous experiences, emphasising the accessibility of colleagues for guidance and assistance; having completed a teacher preparation program for SCTs was also cited as advantageous. They felt confident approaching peers with questions and valued veteran teacher support: “I wouldn’t have such a high score if it weren’t for my mentor. I can go to people and ask about anything. The school and staff are extremely supportive.” Another teacher also commented on the advantages of having seasoned teacher mentors: “Just think of all that knowledge and efficacy that could be used to mentor the novice—maybe if [leaders] made new teachers’ lives a little easier and gave them more support with mentors, you’d have [fewer] absences.” Providing additional support and mentorship to new SCTs enriches teaching environments (Kulekci Akyavuz, 2021).

These career changers seemed comfortable discussing personal matters and appreciated assistance from their close-knit groups: “The team I work with really brings me up, even when I’m having a bad day. I can talk about anything and they’re there to help no matter what.” They described building trust and friendships with colleagues who understood the demands novice teachers face. Having a department or team of teachers that lifted them up and were unconditionally supportive were reasons given for their positive PsyCap scores. Collegial collaboration creates closeness and generates constructive synergies in school cultures (Raj et al., 2019).

A coach mentored some of the SCTs in the first year. They described the best ones as expert pedagogues who encouraged and observed them in their classroom and invited them into their own. Creating the capacity for mindfulness and PsyCap, as revealed in the literature, depends on quality mentoring arrangements like these. Watching coaches teach and maintain classroom control at difficult times helped the SCTs to become more effective, despite the challenges associated with learning to teach. But three SCTs remembered not having a mentor or being negatively mentored. Although one did have a mentor, after changing schools in their second year, the support did not continue, which proved burdensome. In their early years, these SCTs considered quitting teaching.

Overall, when describing mentor support in the building, participants highlighted the value of supportive and collaborative peers, the role of mentors in PD and efficacy in teaching, and the positive impact of being mentored by veterans who were demonstrably committed to mentoring practice. Their responses also reflected the need for a support network and trustworthy individuals in navigating the complexities of teaching and school life.
Relationships With Colleagues and Teams Impacted PsyCap as Qualitatively Determined (Finding 3)

Fifteen SCTs responded that a school’s culture greatly influenced their personal PsyCap at the job. Eight stated that community among staff was particularly impactful, one of whom added that teachers continue working in a school if they like with whom they associate daily. Good relationships and community are crucial for teachers in their working lives (Ansley et al., 2019).

Just as these SCTs shared the importance of teachers forming a positive, helpful, and united group, so too have researchers. A strong sense of unity is essential for a healthy culture and contributes to enhanced efficacy within the teaching community. The SCTs in our study saw healthy communities as a driving force in feeling hope and optimism at school. Creating conditions for PsyCap depend on learning communities that build capacity for teacher efficacy (Battersby & Verdi, 2015). Even though a supportive community can boost SCTs’ PsyCap, for seven interviewees, peers’ negative attitudes adversely affected their psychological state.

To our interviewees, teachers’ attitudes greatly influence the overall atmosphere in the school either negatively or positively and can affect both colleagues and students. Staff members have this level of influence when their adverse emotions are aired repeatedly without any resolution. To six of the SCTs, when an attitudinal issue festers, hopelessness and apathy spread.

Collaboration among peers was a particular refrain in the interview data. The knowledge and wisdom of seasoned, trusted educators that are willing to share tips and specific feedback was highly valued by the SCTs. Effective communication and opening up about experiences and concerns with colleagues help further a healthy, trusting workplace and positive PsyCap. Several mentioned that teaming allowed them to better handle day-to-day challenges: “The team has been really useful and supportive. I may be exhausted, but I want to be with those people.”

Negative climate in schools can have a deep and lasting impact on culture, stated six participants: “When negativity snowballs you end up in a toxic environment.” Two talked about how staff pessimism sends a distressing signal to students: “They can tell if you aren’t enjoying your job and if you have no hope or optimism, which affects them. Why would they feel positive and optimistic if their teacher doesn’t?” Fostering collaborative culture is essential in enhancing productivity, boosting morale, and mitigating burnout and conflict among teachers (Brown et al., 2018). In positive cultures, teachers are encouraged to pool resources, plan together, and share expertise, which promotes a cooperative, self-motivated staff ethos (Ansley et al., 2019).

Collegial relationships in their buildings held sway for these SCTs: “I’m thrilled with the staff I have today and that we get together. We’re cohesive and genuinely like each other, which is important.” Three teachers valued having colleagues with whom to vent frustrations and constructively solve problems. They appreciated a culture where they could open up about issues and celebrate successes. Quality relationships were thought to raise PsyCap levels for the SCTs.
Career Switchers’ Relationship With Leaders Affected Their PsyCap Per Qualitative Analyses (Finding 4)

School leaders who develop relationships with staff contribute to the foundation of PsyCap, according to the responses received. SCTs who trusted their leadership and felt trusted had stronger teaching efficacy: “[Leaders] play a huge role in the PsyCap of teachers, and I think it’s more than realised.” Interviewees also conveyed the importance of having principals who are engaged, personable, encouraging, and present. As espoused by these SCTs, teachers desire an authentic relationship with leaders that encourages trust and growth. Researchers have described these welcoming school-level behaviours and effects as leadership mindfulness that cultivates teacher PsyCap, with such associated benefits as workplace happiness and well-being (Kun & Gadanez, 2022; Moon, 2019; Raj et al., 2019; Ruitenburg & Tigchelaar, 2021).

Principal support was reported by eight SCTs as mattering to their PsyCap. They appreciated leaders who encouraged their contributions at work and gave helpful feedback (as confirmed by Balcerzyk, 2021). Beyond their own professional needs, they emphasised the importance of leadership that sets a positive tone, contributes to a healthy work environment, and makes their faculties feel valued and motivated: “We have a good leadership team” and “Our principal was magnificent, and the other [leaders] were great too. I felt supported.” Three teachers affirmed flexibility and creativity as attributes of strong school teams—one relayed this anecdote about the impact on his teaching and self-efficacy: “Supportive [leaders] convinced me to teach middle school English, saying, ‘Make it your own, you’re creative, so be creative. Let’s see what you can do.’ Just giving me some freedom and flexibility to do my own thing was good.” School leaders who promote feeling valued and motivated at work garner better climate and student outcomes, per Dicke et al.’s (2020) examination of teachers’ and their principals’ job satisfaction.

The beginning teacher who is working alone without direction and help or collegial friendship is a school-level problem, stated seven SCTs. Some felt that their leadership did not understand their unique pedagogical challenges (need for integrated services or exceptional education roles, etc.). Other SCTs cited instances of not feeling supported in difficult situations. The communication style of principals, SCTs noted, affected their PsyCap. They valued feedback delivered in a supportive manner, acknowledging that positivity contributed to their growth, which is consistent with other beginning teacher studies (Kulekci Akyavuz, 2021; Raj et al., 2019). But negative experiences with principals triggered frustration and feeling undermined: “I worked for a principal who was manipulative and micromanaged in a way that chipped away at people. You can take it until it starts beating you down.”

The need for clear communication from leaders was emphasised by some SCTs, especially regarding expectations, evaluations, and the purpose of observations (as confirmed by Range et al., 2013). In our interview data, miscommunication, nontransparency, micromanagement, and limited support harmed teacher–leader relationships and teachers’ well-being and professional engagement, eroding their PsyCap. Good impacts stemming from positive support and relationships with leadership, effective communication, and a collaborative approach to impactful decision making were associated with leaders’ efforts to forge a cooperative, nonjudgemental atmosphere. SCTs spoke about the indispensable role that leaders play in
shaping school climate, with effective leaders contributing positively to their PsyCap and job satisfaction. Undesirable experiences with leadership (feeling undervalued or unsupported, etc.) can lead to a decline in PsyCap. Being assigned extra duties was not welcomed, for example, and undermined one’s PsyCap.

Our participants narrated interactions and relationships with mentors, peers, and principals in their socialisation, success, and PsyCap. They sought out people in the school community to experience connection and belonging. These teachers also paid attention to the role of leaders in developing genuine, trusting relationships with teachers and ensuring they felt valued, believing that such organisational dynamics boosted PsyCap and efficacy in teaching. SCTs require good work conditions that emanate from support systems, healthy relationships, and authentic leadership to have a thriving PsyCap (Dicke et al., 2020; Helms-Lorenz & Maulana, 2016; Joo et al., 2015).

An original image (Figure 1) emerged from our analysis of the PsyCap and HERO literature. We integrated leadership support and style into it, recognising the magnitude of principals as an external, mediating force that influences SCTs’ personal HERO, adaptation to the school environment, and capacity to contribute and succeed on the job (Çobanoğlu & Bozbayindir, 2019; Dicke et al., 2020). Leaders’ role relative to teachers’ satisfaction at work and desire to stay is vital.

**Figure 1**

*Leadership Influences on Teacher PsyCap and HERO*

Discussion

The analysis of data shed light on our research question concerning the PsyCap of career switchers and what they believe influences their positive mental states. Quantitatively, for the PCQ-24 questionnaire, components of HERO were accurately reflected in SCTs’ scores. Qualitatively, interview findings were: (a) PsyCap results accurately reflected individual HERO; (b) mentorship and peer support influenced PsyCap; (c) relationships with colleagues and teams impacted PsyCap; and (d) relationships with leaders affected PsyCap. Related issues were raised: required extra duties, handling student misconduct, the decision to become a teacher, student–teacher relationships, PD, compensation, and SCT preparation programs. Agreeing with their results, interviewees reflectively interpreted them, as in: “I definitely feel as though I’m on the higher end when it comes to self-efficacy and optimism. Not many people in education are optimistic right now.”

Most career switchers attributed their PsyCap to relationships with peers and mentors, and onsite leaders. Camaraderie and support seemed to really matter to them (and influence their scores), particularly beneficial mentoring during their early teaching years. As reported, their relationship with peers affected their PsyCap at work: school community, teacher attitudes, collaboration, and relationships were key influences. Supportive feedback and encouragement from leaders also shaped their mental states. Additional influences were their former careers, parenting experiences, and adaptability. However, the extra work expected of teachers (covering for absent colleagues, attending numerous meetings, etc.) was frowned upon, weakening these newcomers’ PsyCap: “I only have two planning periods weekly because I have to cover for absent teachers.”

As study limitations, the results are specific to participating Virginia schools and lack generalisability. Also, principals and beginning teachers whose teaching certification followed traditional pathways were outside the scope of this study. Although this study offers potentially useful results, we had only a small participant pool for our exploratory work.

Implications for Practice

A study implication is that leaders need to know how to nurture SCTs’ PsyCap. Cultivating career switchers’ psychological states is an important act of leadership (Ruitenburg & Tigchelaar, 2021). Within schools, SCT numbers are growing in different countries, which is a much-needed, valuable employee pool in public education (Baeten & Meeus, 2016; Ruitenburg & Tigchelaar, 2021). Assuming that school leaders are invested in retention, school buy-in, and job satisfaction, they should understand the PsyCap of SCTs and how to influence it. From our study, authentic connections with mentors, peers, and principals were key factors in retaining SCTs and developing their PsyCap at work. SCTs disclosed that their choice in career and former experiences, as well as enrolment in a career-switcher preparation program, enriched their mental capacities. Misbehaving pupils, extra duties, and detrimental relationships were said to worsen their PsyCap, whereas compensation, meaningful PD, and healthy student–teacher relationships improved it.
Principals are encouraged to invest in learning about PsyCap relative to beginning teachers. They will want to understand how best to support them, foster strong mentor teachers for incoming SCTs, use team building wisely, provide opportunities for mentors to connect regularly with mentees and for team collaboration, and pair SCTs with teachers close by. Leaders are urged to talk with SCTs and develop relationships that promote trust, growth, and innovation, as well as tap into their prior experiences. SCTs can contribute their knowledge more broadly to school matters and problems. Principals can limit the extra duties assigned and share the reasoning behind them.

Of further note, principals who reflect on their own PsyCap and cultivate teacher PsyCap are considering their school’s sustainability. They can take these actions even as they hire staff with emergency/provisional licences to fill vacancies and without the formal training to lead a class, or who are instructing out of field (Richman & Crain, 2022).

School districts’ parallel role is to implement PD and other practices that generate understanding of career switchers’ PsyCap and garner support within schools. Career-switcher programs offered by departments of education are suited to the PsyCap of new SCTs, and their retention and unique contribution to the teaching mission. Responding to the teacher attrition crisis, induction/mentoring programs have become commonplace. High-quality induction programs offer needs-based PD, access to new networks, and standards-based assessments of novice teachers. Effective districts and schools appropriately address what is known about teacher needs, including those specific to career changers (National School Boards Association, 2022). Because districts sponsor teacher induction and formal programming (Mullen & Fallen, 2022), the principal is not solely responsible for socialising teachers. An implication in this regard, then, involves how best to activate a web of stakeholders intent on building capacity for newcomer learning and success. To enrich teacher and principal preparation, university faculty may want to use our results.

Future Research Directions

Studies of teacher PsyCap, happiness, and satisfaction at work have been growing internationally. As examples, we have cited evidence from Belgium (Baeten & Meeus, 2016), China (Zhao et al., 2022), Hungary (Kun & Gadancz, 2022), Turkey (Büyükşahin Çevik, 2017; İhtiyaroğlu, 2018), and the United States (Luthans & Youssef-Morgan, 2017). As Baeten and Meeus (2016) recommended, while USA-based research is available on SCTs and their mental states, more is needed transnationally on the preparation and development of nontraditional teachers in schools.

Factors that influence career switchers’ PsyCap today and tomorrow may vary from place to place, so more general findings and deeper insights could result from further analysis. Moreover, comparisons of PsyCap in different schools and societies could yield new knowledge.

The prior life experiences of career changers are worth exploring since this was one of five factors at work that impacted a high number of the individuals’ PsyCap scores in our study sample.
Although earlier experiences as well as preparatory and career-switcher programs were mentioned by participants, we did not design our study to consider their influence on PsyCap. Inquiries could be made into the value of such experiences and programs for SCTs.

Investigations are also needed to elucidate leadership theory and practice relative to PsyCap, satisfaction, and happiness. PsyCap from the teacher and leader’s view could deepen and broaden what is known about factors that influence PsyCap in school communities, especially in underserved, high-need areas. Findings from other studies have also shown that teacher perceptions and leadership style are important in predicting happiness at work and retention (Çobanoğlu & Bozbayindir, 2019; Dicke et al., 2020). Trust and belief in a leader greatly affect job satisfaction and the four areas of HERO.

A related pathway is for study of mindfulness connected to PsyCap. “Leadership-focused mindfulness practices” ostensibly promote reflection and compassion (Partin, 2022, p. 10). Such practice also improves principals’ relationships with teachers and their willingness to take on demanding tasks, participate in PD, and contribute in other ways. Further, “principal mindfulness” has been shown to improve organisational climate, such as by regulating emotions in tough situations and promoting decisions that are fair. Perhaps leaders who invest in “mindfulness practices” are more empowered to develop others’ psychological capacities and HERO capabilities.

Conclusion

This article contributes research on PsyCap and HERO to educational leadership. We illuminated perspectives from an increasingly utilised but poorly understood segment of the teaching force—career switchers. Also, we underscored the critical role of leaders in enhancing positive attitudes and behaviours from the SCT’s viewpoint. By linking a psychological construct (PsyCap) to a particular type of beginning teacher—the SCT—connected to school leadership, we offer something new. In this analysis of the career-switcher phenomenon and school leadership we have attempted to raise awareness about who SCTs are and what they think affects their mental states.

Teacher PsyCap is fertile ground for encouraging shared positive thinking that enables SCTs to adapt to teaching and workplace culture. A goal is to learn about these dynamics, and support and retain the (unconventional) newcomer so schools and children can thrive. Principals need a working knowledge of PsyCap and ways to promote satisfaction and happiness in their organisation; to this end, we offered strategies and insights. Leaders might already have tacit knowledge of HERO or interest in the psychological condition of their staff, but accessing this model for learning about PsyCap and cultivating positive emotions can improve a culture. Given the record-breaking turnover of teachers and extreme shortages, the mental state of all educators deserves attention.
Authors’ Note

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References


Supporting Academic Staff Through Internal Secondments in Tertiary Education. The Role of Leadership

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ABSTRACT: Seconding academic staff into different roles within the same organisation has become common practice in tertiary education. Despite this, internal secondments in education are seldom recorded, reviewed, or assessed resulting in the potential benefits for both staff and their organisations being somewhat overlooked. As such, research was undertaken to gain a better understanding about internal secondments for academic staff within tertiary education in Aotearoa New Zealand. The study focused on the benefits and challenges internal secondments pose for academic staff and the organisation, and the role that leadership plays in secondments. Findings from the study indicated that internal secondments provide opportunities for academic staff to develop professional capability and overall career advancement, and benefit the organisation. However, the study also brought to light the critical role that leaders play to ensure these secondments are managed with care.

Key words: Secondment, leadership, tertiary education, professional capability, relational

Introduction

This article reports on results from a study which explored the experience of internal secondments for academic staff within tertiary education and in particular how this may impact their professional capability. Although the practice of seconding academic staff to different roles within the same organisation has become common practice within tertiary education in Aotearoa New Zealand, there has been minimal research in this area. Little is known about the potential
benefits for academic staff and their organisation, or the challenges of internal secondments. Furthermore, research focusing on the role that leaders play in the process of secondments is scarce.

**Defining Secondment**

Dryden and Rice (2008) define internal secondment as the practice of temporarily lending an employee to a different part or post within the same organisation for a specified purpose and period. This temporary lending can happen within the same organisation, as in an internal secondment, or with a different organisation altogether. However, the issue with this definition of internal secondment is that it implies that the employee (secondee) will return to their previous department (Dryden & Rice, 2008). Renshaw and Holland (2013) challenge this definition and argue that while it appears to be rather straightforward it does not consider the reasons for, or effects of, the secondment. They also point out that because the systems to track the specific outcomes of secondments are not always in place, it is impossible to assess their success (Renshaw & Holland, 2013). In practice however, internal secondment can signal a variety of things to leaders and organisations, including filling gaps, compensating for deficiencies in experience, enhancing capability, addressing organisational issues, producing strategy, and succession planning (Walker et al., 2021). While Renshaw and Holland (2013) agree that internal secondment is most commonly seen as a tool for talent management and fostering relationships with others, they go on to characterise internal secondment as ad hoc, providential, and exclusive to the individual secondee in execution.

**Outcomes**

Although the literature highlights different definitions of and reasons for seconding academic staff from one role to another, there are a number of positive outcomes when secondments are managed well. For example, internal secondments have been shown to provide the means for professional development and career advancement for individual staff members and for organisations to retain valuable employees whose skills are in demand (Dryden & Rice, 2008; Gerrish & Piercy, 2014; Hamilton & Wilkie, 2001; Walker et al., 2021). Hamilton and Wilkie (2001) point out that the practice of internal secondments facilitates learning experiences while on the job and can assist in the process of succession planning. Costley et al. (2008) suggest that secondment enables academic staff to expand, improve, and prove their own ability which boosts self-esteem and gives credibility to their work. Others posit it has been shown to build resilience in staff (Gerrish & Piercy, 2014; Longden, 1991; Whyte, 1999). Internal secondments offer other benefits in terms of nurturing relationships between different teams, allowing staff to learn from others and become more knowledgeable, as well as developing stronger interpersonal skills (Gerrish & Piercy, 2014; Smith et al., 2021). The importance of academic staff having opportunities to engage with colleagues from different teams and disciplines for professional learning has been highlighted by Cotronei-Baird et al. (2023). Furthermore, Whitchurch (2009) explains secondments involve seeing opportunities in the
unexpected and building alliances, for instance bringing together learning and/or business partners from within the organisation and the community, which can in turn drive innovation.

Despite these positive outcomes, Renshaw and Holland (2013) point out that secondments can be unsuccessful and challenging, particularly if there is a disparity in expectations between the “home” department or organisation and the department to which they are being seconded. Smith et al. (2021) agree and found in their study that challenges arose when academic staff objected to the duties being assigned to a secondee in an area they believed was strictly “their” responsibility. These interactions, which the authors refer to as “gatekeeping encounters” (Smith et al., 2021, p. 509), have an impact, and usually leave secondees feeling vulnerable and unsettled. Others agree that secondments have the potential to result in feelings of isolation, perplexity, and ambiguity due to the lack of specificity in job descriptions (Gerrish & Piercy, 2014; Hamilton & Wilkie, 2001; Renshaw & Holland, 2013). It is evident that challenges could well arise when secondments are poorly managed and there is a lack of communication or clarity around responsibilities and roles. Walker et al. (2021) point out this is more likely to occur when internal secondments are informal arrangements between two teams, with human resources (HR) assisting with system access only and the occasional office transfer.

The Role of Leadership

While effective leadership is identified as being crucial for internal secondment (Dryden & Rice, 2008), little is known about what the role entails for leaders (Whitchurch, 2009). Trusting connections has been identified as enabling academic staff and their managers to work together for individual well-being and successful internal secondments (Renshaw & Holland, 2013). This aligns with Le Fevre (2010) who posits relational trust is “essential to the creation of an environment in which people are willing to take risks” (p. 84). Similarly, Carlyon and Branson (2018) explain when undergoing any change, clear communication and positive, trusting relationships between staff and leaders are essential. Research which focused on understanding more about teachers changing from one role to another highlighted that success “in terms of teacher professional learning is shown to be fundamentally dependent on the actions of school leadership” (Carlyon 2016, p. 102). Teachers in Carlyon’s (2016) study reported they were able to successfully manage a change in roles when positive relationships were established, and their leaders were transparent, honest, and followed clear processes.

Branson (2011) suggests it is important that leaders demonstrate “authentic and transformational leadership … that responds to evolving educational demands” (p. 112). He adds that this style of leadership demands effective communication, clear direction, and the ability to develop others as leaders. Spiller et al. (2015) suggest this style of leadership starts with followers’ needs and is characterised by attributes such as sensitivity and adaptability. Leaders such as these know their own and others’ values, moral viewpoints, experiences, and strengths (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Furthermore, authentic, transformational leaders can drive organisational change and boost the confidence of those they are leading (Begley, 2006; Branson, 2011; Spiller et al., 2015). Yet despite the significant role leaders play in higher education and their impact on culture and morale, Debowsk (2022) argues “many are thrust into key roles with little support or guidance” (p. 14).
Summary

While literature on internal secondments within tertiary education is scarce, research does suggest the practice has the potential to benefit both secondees and their organisations. Additionally, studies indicate that leadership plays an integral role in secondments and for staff to successfully change from one role to another, a particular style of leadership is required. As diversification of professional and academic activity (Veles & Carter, 2016) and changes in conditions from COVID-19 (Debowski, 2022) have become increasing realities in higher education, it is important to ensure leaders and managers understand their role within internal secondments.

The research reported on in this article goes some way to addressing the gap in the literature pertaining to internal secondments. It also gives a voice to academic staff who have experienced being seconded from one role to another within a tertiary organisation in Aotearoa New Zealand. It presents a view of secondment and an understanding of the benefits and challenges for both academic staff and the organisation. It also explores the role of leadership within secondments and how managers can best support academic staff to successfully change from one role to another. There were three research questions driving the study:

1. What are the benefits for academic staff and their organisations from internal secondment?
2. What are the challenges for academic staff from internal secondment?
3. What role does leadership play in internal secondment?

Research Method

The research was positioned within an interpretive framework, while using case study methodology. An interpretive framework was deemed useful as the researchers were interested in how individuals construct meaning of their experiences as they interacted with others (Doyle & Loveridge, 2023). A case study, according to Cohen et al. (2011) “focuses on conveying ‘participants’ lived experiences of thinking about and feelings for a situation” (p. 254). Case study methodology is particularly suitable when researchers want to explore a program, event, activity, or process (such as secondment) on one or more individuals in-depth (Creswell, 2009; Feagin et al., 1991; Yin, 2014). This methodology was advantageous for the study because it allowed the researchers to gain a deeper knowledge of participants’ experiences of secondment and how they viewed the role of their leaders before, during, and after the process.

Methods of Data Collection and Analysis

Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews conducted with five participants in 2022. Interviews were conducted virtually to ensure mandatory social distancing rules were adhered to during August to September 2022 (due to the COVID pandemic) and lasted between 45–60 minutes. The interviews were all recorded using Microsoft Teams and transcribed for analysis at a later date. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns and
themes (Mutch, 2005) from each of the individual interviews and then collectively across all five interviews. This approach was in line with both Merriam (2001) and Stake (2003), who suggest that data gathering and analysis should occur concurrently and continually. The data analysis process also included viewing the recordings of the interviews in order to highlight and underline important phrases and ideas that came up in each one. This aligns with Burton and Bartlett (2009) who explain a researcher’s initial goal is to “properly interpret” the interviews (p. 93). As Kervin et al. (2006) suggest, researchers must spend time organising and “playing with the data” (p. 140). From this analysis, key words and themes were identified and used to categorise findings. Key words can be described as repeated words, strong emotions, analogies, images, highlighted items, significant phrases, and main concepts (Mutch, 2005).

Participants

To ensure a breadth of experiences and observations were captured, five academic staff were purposefully chosen to participate in the research. These academic staff had all been identified by their managers as being effective practitioners within each of their disciplines as well as experienced with secondments. They were invited to participate after ethical approval was granted to undertake the study by the University of Waikato Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato ethics committee. To protect the participants’ anonymity, pseudonyms were used and all organisational, geographic, and demographic identifiers were removed. An overview of the five participants is provided in Table 1.

Table 1

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Participant pseudonym</th>
<th>Number of secondments</th>
<th>Duration of initial secondment</th>
<th>Duration of extension</th>
<th>Total duration of secondment(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tina</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6 months</td>
<td>12 months</td>
<td>3.5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oscar</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>12 months</td>
<td>10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shirley</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>12 months</td>
<td>10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>12 months</td>
<td>3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hemi</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>12 months</td>
<td>3 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Analysis of data highlighted the following four themes under which findings are presented and discussed: the characteristics of successful secondees; developing professional capability; challenges; and the role of leadership.

Characteristics of Secondees

All five participants presented themselves to be relational, have a genuine interest in new experiences, thrive in the unknown, and able to maintain multiple roles. Shirley explained that
she occasionally “found an internal secondment for herself”. Other examples were provided by Oscar who described creating learning activities and processes within the pilot initiative he was involved in and said he “truly loved attempting new stuff”. Hemi talked about how he used a strengths-based approach, tapping into his creativity and ability to lean into uncertainty. Because there was a certain level of expectation that their secondment was results driven, Oscar, Tina, Shirley, and Hemi all concluded that to be successful they needed to be able to solve problems, be natural networkers, and be very good at communicating and recognising opportunities. For Alex and Tina, while this was evident, so was the need to grow and develop resilience, as they reported working in change management was not an easy space in which to work.

It became abundantly clear in the interviews that successful secondments were dependent on the participants having the skills to build relationships within different teams. While it was a challenge during the pandemic to be physically present, the participants said it was important to be working in the same physical location whenever possible. Working in the same office gave the participants opportunities to interact with colleagues informally, which they believed led to better relationships and trust. Shirley also explained that it was not only important to have solid strategic knowledge, but also the ability to interact with people from all backgrounds and pointed out “in education, it is necessary!” Tina also had significant experience in supporting others and considered developing relationships and networking with colleagues from different areas of the organisation as crucial to the success of her secondment.

**Developing Professional Capability**

Data from the interviews showed that internal secondments provide academic staff with multiple opportunities to develop professional capability. For example, Tina, Hemi, and Shirley all believed they had gained a more comprehensive view of their organisation through their secondments. Tina valued the opportunity to gain a broader view of her organisation and explained how being seconded to a different role “provides you a unique perspective and a different lens”. A further benefit of secondment that emerged was staff developing new skills and knowledge. For Alex, secondments required “honning your skills” and for Hemi it “taught me how to ask better questions … I’ve been able to improve my communication skills.” Shirley recognised that internal secondment required staff to “put yourself out there” and be “vulnerable in order to grow”. This aligns with Longden (1991) who suggests secondees can discover skills they have no idea they possess or thought were underutilised to the fullest in their normal roles.

The participants in the study all noted their secondments provided them with opportunities to collaborate with different staff members and considered this to be a real advantage in terms of career building. Hemi described how secondment “lay the groundwork for the future”. Tina explained “it’s a great opportunity to network and expand your network by meeting kaimahi [staff] on other campus and develop relationships”. As Dryden and Rice (2008) argue, secondments provide employees with a one-of-a-kind opportunity to advance professionally and foster collaboration both within and between organisations.

Being given the opportunity to take on new roles and left to work unassisted gave the participants the assurance that they were capable staff members. Oscar pointed out “it was
wonderful how much it increased my confidence both personally and professionally”. Alex explained how “the organisation did trust me and my abilities … they would not have asked me if they did not believe I was capable”. For Hemi, secondment was “more work, but I enjoy it, so I’ll do it”. He described secondments as being “fluid”, stating that “you must rewrite your job description because the work is self-directed and often for the entire period”. For Shirley, it was reassuring that her manager had confidence she would be successful in her new role and she explained: “I was told, just go ahead and do it, so people [boss, staff, organisation] had trust that I would do the right thing, and they knew I had enough sense to know when to raise my hand and say that’s too difficult for me.” For each of these participants, the experiences helped to develop resilience. As Alex expressed, “if you do not build resilience, you simply will not survive”.

Oscar and Shirley considered secondments as an excellent low-risk opportunity for professional learning because staff still had their primary position to return to if things did not go as planned. Oscar stated how secondments are “a terrific opportunity … we tend to get bogged down in our BAU [business as usual and] don’t do them [secondments] enough”. For Hemi, secondments provided on the job professional development as he explained: “I do not like formal study, I like opportunities and I’m really good at them. When I walk into a new context, I get to utilise my skills.” Being seconded to new roles provided Hemi with opportunities to foster creativity, and he explained that everything he did was inquiry-based.

When academic staff develop professional capability through internal secondments, this also has clear benefits for their organisations. According to Alex, seconding staff to different roles is “a win-win situation for the institute … as long as they [the organisation] backfill secondment positions”. Similarly, Hemi pointed out there are advantages for the organisation because “… you need people who can bend and flex where the gaps exist”. This is clearly supported by Hamilton and Wilkie (2001) who explain that internal secondment places experienced staff where they are needed for the immediate benefit of the organisation. For Oscar and Shirley, having tacit knowledge of the organisation was crucial for them to successfully change roles, aligning with the claim that knowing some of the unspoken or tacit rules helps to deflect and diffuse conflicts that may arise within organisations (Smith et al., 2021; Walker et al., 2021; Whitchurch, 2009).

Challenges

While the findings identified benefits which can arise for both staff and their organisation from secondments, there were also challenges brought to light. These included a lack of procedure, uncertainty, failure to backfill the original role, and lack of support. All five participants said there was no specific procedure followed for their internal secondments, nor was there appropriate induction, both of which they felt were necessary to support secondees and their wellbeing. A clear example of this was provided by Tina who felt pressured to accept her secondment after her manager said, “no one says no to this faculty executive”. Tina had no knowledge of the turmoil in the team she was being seconded to, which included individuals refusing to communicate with one another and the manager having recently left. When Tina arrived in her new role, she was not made to feel welcome and soon realised she was there to “fix
a pretty significant problem” and “felt a bit used”. What started as a six-month secondment turned into a three-and-a-half-year secondment that “was not managed well”. Like Tina’s experience, in Shirley’s view, secondments generally arose because “senior management wanted a safe pair of hands to manage performance issues in departments while it considered what it wanted to do with the future of the department and recruitment of a new manager”. Shirley explained in these secondments she faced “the same problems again and again: isolation of the staff, lack of training or support, not knowing who to ask in the organisation to get things done, and, inevitably, vulnerability”.

Oscar also talked about some unexpected challenges such as the uncertainty that came with his secondment. Towards the end of each 12-month secondment, there was doubt as to whether his secondment would be renewed. Oscar said he would go on Christmas leave and wonder to himself, “Are we going to come back?” In addition, he explained being required to work longer hours than non-seconded staff members and was expected to assess other staff members to see if they were a good fit for the program. He commented that a number of staff found this work environment too challenging. For Tina, the role she was seconded to was at a higher-level, with greater responsibility than her previous role, yet when she asked about an increase in remuneration this was declined. Tina described this situation at the time as making her feel totally undervalued, vulnerable, and left her questioning her future in the organisation.

Another challenge identified by Alex was when the organisation failed to backfill a staff member’s primary role. He went on to explain that failure to free people up from their first role to work on their seconded role often compromised the quality of their work and frequently led to workload issues. Alex said at one stage he had been seconded to two separate part-time roles and found jumping between the two challenging. While he attempted to set up boundaries, and only do each role at certain times in the week, the needs of others made this difficult, as did working across multiple locations. Alex also found it challenging when other staff members and managers did not grasp his new responsibilities within these roles, which generated tensions and a lack of understanding about his priorities.

All the participants during their secondments faced challenges and although they were usually able to manage these, they felt uncertain and at risk of making mistakes. While they all spoke of learning to have confidence in their own abilities, this was not always easy when they felt unsure, isolated, and unsupported. It has been argued that innovative and forward-thinking organisations provide a culture in which there are opportunities for staff to take advantage of secondments as well as other professional learning opportunities (Hamilton & Wilkie, 2001; Renshaw & Holland, 2013).

Leaders Play a Significant Role in Secondments

Both the benefits and challenges of internal secondment highlight the role of leadership as being significant. This was reinforced in Tina’s comment: “I see a lot of potential in internal secondments in a large organisation and a lot of excellent outcomes if it’s managed well!” It was evident from the findings that challenges can be mitigated when managers have clear communication, good processes in place, and positive relationships established with staff. As
Hamilton and Wilkie (2001) argue, there needs to be better preparation, recruitment, induction, and ongoing appraisal and re-entry arrangements.

Clear communication and processes are essential when academic staff are being seconded from one role to another. Some of the suggestions to improve secondment processes put forward from the participants included inductions, mentors, and detailed job descriptions and expectations. These align with Debowski (2022) who argues it is the practices which “strongly influence the readiness of the academic workforce to transition to the future” (p. 16). A specific example was provided by Alex that any secondment should begin with a written letter congratulating and recognising the individual: “Something tangible or written. Something to formalise it.” Similarly, Oscar remarked that he was never properly integrated or inducted during this internal secondment and agreed that managers play a significant role in secondment. He felt that a contract confirming his continued involvement in the program would have been beneficial for him and the team he was supporting. While Hemi clearly welcomed trial-and-error as part of his secondment, he too was adamant that extra support from managers was essential and emphasised that staff need additional time to reflect on their learning as well as process thinking skills. Tina also believed managers played an important role in secondments and considered their support essential to ensure secondees receive clear communication and appropriate remuneration to reflect the role. However, in her experience this did not always occur, and she said: “Isn’t there a moral and ethical responsibility when asking someone to do something that they are remunerated accordingly?”

It was evident for academic staff to successfully change from one role to another there needs to be a positive relationship already established with their managers. An example of this was provided by Alex: “I’ve been very fortunate with supportive managers and good leadership … as well as base team managers who are willing to let me go in the first place.” He continued to say, “Although now they tell me, they were quite reluctant … perhaps it is because they can see how much I have grown and how much I can offer now!” This aligns with Renshaw and Holland (2013) who posit that leadership is the trusting relationships that enable management and teams to work in the connected ways required for organisational success and well-being.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study reported on in this article sought to gain a better understanding of internal secondments for academic staff within tertiary education in Aotearoa New Zealand. In particular, the research focused on the benefits and challenges for both academic staff and their organisation, and the role that leadership plays in secondments. Findings brought to light that academic staff who are seconded from one role to another share similar characteristics including being relational, having the ability to lean into uncertainty, and successfully navigate change. Data also showed there can be clear benefits for both academic staff and their organisations when internal secondments are managed carefully. Notably, academic staff can develop professional capability as they gain a more comprehensive view of their organisation; collaborate and network with a wider group of colleagues; build confidence; and develop greater resilience. Furthermore,
findings confirm research which suggests organisations stand to benefit from internal secondment as academic staff develop their professional capability (Gerrish & Piercy, 2014; Smith et al., 2021).

Notwithstanding the benefits, the study brought to light challenges when changing from one role to another, resulting in academic staff feeling isolated, uncertain, and unsupported. It was evident from the experiences of the participants in the study that such challenges can be attributed to the actions of their managers and the lack of clear processes in place. While the role of leadership was shown to be critical, many of the participants’ managers did not have a good understanding of this role or the importance of establishing positive relationships with academic staff and following clear and supportive processes. This aligns with Carlyon (2016) who argues, because changing from one role to another is a complex process, it is critical for leaders to manage it “strategically and carefully and ensure they consult” (p. 102). Furthermore, those in leadership positions play a key role in organisations to develop and promote a learning culture that supports academic staff to positively experience internal secondments. Findings from the study bring into line the notion that an authentic style of leadership is required to successfully manage the process of internal secondments and help mitigate challenges. As authentic leaders are motivated by relationships, intuition, and sense in the workplace, rather than power, authority, and control (Branson, 2011), they are well placed to manage the process of internal secondments and make informed decisions that will benefit both academic staff and their organisation.

Finally, changing from one role to another is a valuable means for building professional capability for both academic staff and their organisations and is an important aspect of tertiary education. However, the success (or not) of internal secondments has been shown to be largely dependent on the action of leaders and managers who have a critical role to play in the process. As such, the following four recommendations are put forward for leaders and managers to support successful secondments within tertiary education settings:

- Develop knowledge of the complex process of changing from one role to another in order to mitigate challenges associated with internal secondments.
- Identify and support staff who demonstrate potential for development through internal secondment to benefit secondees and the organisation.
- Foster trusting, positive relationships in a purposeful manner to create a culture where opportunities for professional learning and career advancement are encouraged and supported.
- Develop a clear and transparent process for internal secondments which includes providing clear information, check in points, and evaluation.
References


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ABSTRACT: When the COVID-19 virus outbreak began in 2020, and rapidly became a worldwide pandemic, it quickly became apparent that of all the entities least prepared overall for the loss of the long-term “business as usual” manner of doing things, schools and school districts were some of the hardest hit. These, in many cases, were not due to lack of planning, but more so due to the sheer lack of infrastructure to carry on a people-oriented enterprise (the in-person provision of educational services to students) through impersonal means. The few visionary schools and school districts that had planned for such an eventuality were able to carry out their mission of educating all students with very little interruption of service at a level of quality not
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unlike in-person schooling. This study describes what one district in Indiana, in the United States, did before the pandemic to lay a foundation that served them admirably during the pandemic. The analysis of standardised test scores within this school district indicated students receiving online and hybrid instruction did not experience lower test scores or learning losses in comparison with students learning in-person during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Key words: ICT, forms of learning, pedagogies, 21st century skills, emerging technologies

Introduction

No matter what your view is when you look back at the global pandemic that shook the world beginning in the spring of 2020, one thing is certain: schools and school districts that were ahead of the curve with full implementation of e-learning through personal computing devices for each child, and internet services provided in each home, were better prepared for the days ahead. However, having devices and knowing what to do with those devices are two altogether different scenarios. This study tells the story of a small school district in North Central Indiana, in the Midwest United States, that made certain that each student had a personal computing device and internet access in their homes. Through the leadership of the Superintendent of Schools, Dr. Jim White, the faculty and staff of the district were prepared to deliver superior instruction via this medium. The intense training provided to the faculty and students alike in the two years leading up to the pandemic had prepared students for fully online classes district-wide. Strategies utilised by leadership may help guide others, offering practical recommendations for schools.

Literature Review

The introduction of the SARS-CoV-2 virus (COVID-19, coronavirus) during the spring of 2020 disrupted traditional classroom instruction in the United States, forcing closures of over 30,000 K–12 U.S. schools. The pandemic resulted in over one billion students switching to online learning in a short timeframe (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). Garcia and Weiss (2020) shared that the “public education system was not built, nor prepared, to cope with a situation like this” (p. 3), and ultimately, research demonstrates that the majority of U.S. students experienced learning losses due to the challenges posed by COVID-19 (Kuhfeld, Soland et al., 2020).

In an attempt to continue education efforts, many U.S. schools elected to switch to virtual learning. Teachers regularly reported struggling managing workload prior to the pandemic (e.g., Hargreaves, 2003), and reports of workload exhaustion were escalated amidst the pandemic (Phillips & Cain, 2020). Teachers and students felt unprepared to make the switch to online learning on such short notice (Whalen, 2020), and many students faced difficulties with online learning due to a lack of access to electronic devices and reliable internet (Ferri et al., 2020).

Though the responses of U.S. schools were widely the same, individual experiences during the pandemic varied. While nearly all individuals and communities were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, the extent to which their lives were impacted varied based on multiple
factors, such as the region where they lived, their demographic, their family composition, and their socioeconomic status (Garcia & Weiss, 2020). Census data shows that Black, Latino, indigenous, immigrant, and low-income households were impacted at disproportionate rates (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2021). Research showed that ethnic minorities (specifically Black and Hispanic students) and lower income students were less likely than white students and wealthier students to have access to high-quality internet and instructional practice to enable scoring well on assessments (Garcia & Weiss, 2020; Goldberg, 2018), inferring that these groups were inadequately prepared for distance learning amidst the pandemic. Already-existent opportunity gaps widened for minorities and low-income students (Garcia & Weiss, 2020), with evidence suggesting Black and Hispanic students may have experienced learning loss (Kuhfeld, Tarasawa et al., 2020).

**Implications of COVID-19**

A systematic review by Donnelly and Patrinos (2022) found seven studies documenting evidence of learning loss, and only one providing evidence of learning gains from March 2020 to March 2021. The studies documenting learning loss included concrete outcome measures such as standardised tests (Kuhfeld et al., 2022; Schult et al., 2022) and course assessment scores (Orlov et al., 2021). Furthermore, Kuhfeld et al.’s (2022) study using Northwest Evaluation Association’s (known as NWEA) Measures of Academic Progress (known as MAP) Growth assessment test scores of approximately 5 million third- to seventh-grade students revealed learning losses as a result of COVID-19 school closures. A separate analysis by many of the same researchers (Kuhfeld, Tarasawa et al., 2020) revealed that the declines in mathematics were especially prevalent and that “nearly twice as many students dropped one or more quintiles on the [MAP Growth] test score distribution in fall 2020 compared to the prior fall” (p. 8).

Findings from Curriculum Associates data from over nine million students shared similar concerning conclusions. Though students did exhibit learning progress in the 2020-2021 academic year, fewer students were on grade level in mathematics and reading. Additionally, fewer students were on grade level than previous years, especially in schools serving mostly Black and Latino students and lower income communities, clearly demonstrating the exacerbation of the inequities members of these groups already faced prior to the pandemic (Curriculum Associates, 2021).

It is projected that the COVID-19 pandemic will have long-lasting impacts on the education system (Azevedo et al., 2021). One of these changes is projected to be the expansion of online learning opportunities in pre-Kindergarten through 12th grade education. For online instruction to be effective, research demonstrates that teachers must be trained in delivering online instruction and each student must have consistent access to the internet and computers (Garcia & Weiss, 2020). The pandemic demonstrated that there is an overwhelming need for one-to-one computing. One-to-one computing describes district-level initiatives that seek to provide a device, typically a laptop or iPad, to each student. This initiative is not a new one and it is growing in popularity across the globe (Penuel, 2006; Zheng et al., 2016). In 2017, about half of U.S. teachers had a one-to-one device program (EdTech Staff, 2017). Teachers and students generally have a positive response to one-to-one computing efforts, and studies have found that
providing devices to students can raise student engagement, persistence, motivation, and collaboration (Bebell & Kay, 2010; Zheng et al., 2016). Additionally, one-to-one computing programs can improve students’ writing abilities and technology skill, preparing them for college and career readiness in today’s digital world (Penuel, 2006; Zheng et al., 2016).

**Modality of Instruction**

Even before the pandemic, virtual schools (including virtual preschool programs) have been growing in popularity (Barbour, 2012; Zalaznick, 2019). Researchers have yet to grapple with the questions of how pedagogy differs between online and in-person settings and whether teachers who were training to be in-person teachers can successfully deliver content virtually (Dennis, 2021). A number of studies indicate technical issues and instructors’ lack of technical skills can negatively influence perceptions of online learning (Coman et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2021; Ferri et al., 2020; Konig et al., 2020; Trust & Whalen, 2021). Teachers with greater levels of experience with virtual learning exhibited higher self-efficacy for teaching online during the COVID-19 pandemic (Dolighan & Owen, 2021). Qualitative interviews with teachers reveal that professional development for online learning, technology access and training for teachers and students, as well as action plans and communication may help better prepare teachers for emergencies that require transitioning to teaching online (An et al., 2021).

Studies prior to the pandemic reveal that online learning can be just as efficacious (or even more efficacious) compared to learning in person (Cavanaugh, 2001; Chou & Liu, 2005; Means et al., 2013). In-person instruction refers to learning environments in which students are present in physical classrooms, within a traditional school. Online instruction refers to learning environments in which instruction is primarily carried out over the internet or virtually. Hybrid instruction is some combination of the two prior models. For example, a meta-analysis of learners ages 13 to 40 by Means et al. (2013) found slightly higher performance from students learning online, compared to those in solely face-to-face learning environments. Another study by Randolph and Liu (2022) compared middle school student outcomes during in-person, online, and hybrid modes of instruction, finding no statistically significant difference in GPA for varying modes of instruction. In fact, even, transitions from in-person to online instructions prior to the pandemic did not significantly influence GPA. However, when students transitioned from online to hybrid or hybrid to online instruction during the pandemic, Randolph and Liu (2022) noted GPA changes, suggesting that rather than the mode of instruction, the challenges associated with the pandemic may be driving academic decrements more so than the modality of instruction.

However, lack of access to computers and reliable internet can hinder student success in online and hybrid learning environments. Studies of experiences during the pandemic highlight the lack of student access to electronic devices and digital literacy skills as a challenge to online learning (Ferri et al., 2020). Hybrid approaches were also common during the COVID-19 pandemic and may have alleviated internet and computer access issues for some students. Pacheco-Cortés and Montes-Ponce (2020) revealed many teachers preferred the hybrid model over distance and in-person learning models during the pandemic. Qualitative findings reveal this modality enabled teachers and students to overcome obstacles associated with learning solely online. Quantitative research considering academic outcome measures corroborates these results,
with a meta analysis revealing hybrid modalities exhibit significantly more positive effects than in-person instruction (Means et al., 2013). While Means et al. (2013) and Todd et al. (2017) revealed positive effects for hybrid instruction prior to the pandemic, Randolph and Liu (2022) noted the converse during the pandemic, with higher GPAs for students receiving in-person instruction in comparison to those receiving hybrid instruction.

Although fewer studies have been conducted in the kindergarten through twelfth grade environment, studies of undergraduate learning outcomes during the COVID-19 pandemic indicate in-person classrooms resulted in the most desirable outcomes while fully online classrooms resulted in the least desirable outcomes and hybrid classrooms fell between them (Xing and Saghaian, 2022). This contradicts some findings prior to the pandemic that support the efficacy of online and hybrid learning (Cavanaugh, 2001; Means et al., 2013). However, evidence on learning outcomes across modalities is not homogeneous, both before and during the pandemic, and may vary based on context, student characteristics, dropout rates, and outcome measures (Callister & Love, 2016; Harris-Packer & Ségol, 2015). Although Cavanaugh (2001) and Means et al. (2013) highlighted benefits associated with online and hybrid instruction, even prior to the pandemic, some studies asserted online learning may result in poorer test scores than in-person learning (Harris-Packer & Ségol, 2015).

Although the pandemic introduced unique challenges for teaching and learning, studies prior to the pandemic endorsed the efficacy of both virtual and hybrid instruction in various contexts (Randolph & Liu, 2022; Todd et al., 2017), with efficacy varying based on level and subject. For example, a meta-analysis of 66 empirical studies conducted by Todd et al. (2017) studied the delivery of ethics instruction and found a hybrid approach may be most effective due to the strength of delivering process-based content face-to-face and compliance-based content online.

All in all, the lack of conclusive evidence for hybrid versus online versus in-person instruction highlights the influence of school level, technology availability, and instructor preparedness as well as the importance of considering how various measures may support differing narratives. For online education to be effective, students and teachers need adequate supports (Bryant et al., 2020; Carey, 2020), many of which were not present in the midst of the pandemic.

**NWEA**

The Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) is a global not-for-profit agency that was developed in 1973 by researchers from Oregon and Washington State to create a testing system that measures academic achievement level and growth at the individual student level (NWEA, n.d.). A popular assessment of individual student progress in K–12 is the MAP Growth test, which covers reading, language usage, mathematics, and general sciences topics. The MAP Growth test “dynamically [adjusts] to each student’s performance, [offering a] personalized assessment experience that accurately measures performance” (NWEA, 2019, n.p.).

This assessment is used nationwide to assess student achievement and predict readiness for the upcoming semester by adapting the questions to match progress on previous questions (TestPrep Online, n.d.). MAP Growth tests use Rasch unit (RIT) scores, which are described to
be the most reliable in the industry (NWEA, 2019). These units are measured on an equally-spaced interval scale and compare previous scores on prior MAP tests, allowing educators to get a snapshot of a child’s entire academic career. RIT scores generally range from 140-300 and represent a prediction of a level in which a student will respond to 50% of questions correctly, providing a benchmark of a student’s academic skill level (TestPrep Online, n.d.). Research by NWEA researchers Kuhfeld, Tarasawa et al. (2020) measuring how pre- and post-pandemic MAP Growth tests were influenced by COVID-19 revealed that students showed declines in mathematics but performed similarly in reading to same grade students of the previous year.

**ILEARN**

Indiana Learning Evaluation Assessment Readiness Network (ILEARN) is an untimed, computer-adaptive summative accountability assessment that was developed by educator committees and content experts (Indiana Department of Education, n.d.). Using Indiana Academic Standards as a basis, ILEARN measures third through eighth grade students in their proficiency in English/Language Arts (Grades 3–8), Mathematics (Grades 3–8), Science (Grades 4 and 6), and Social Studies (Grade 5). Each grade and subject have their own cut scores that were determined using research-based methodologies. Student progress is organised into proficiency levels (“Approaching Proficiency”, “At Proficiency”, and “Above Proficiency”), allowing educators to determine how well-versed the students are in Indiana standards (Jenner, 2019). See Jenner (2019) to view cut scores for each assessed subject by grade level.

**Present Study**

Though there is a consensus that COVID-19 negatively impacted abilities to provide a well-rounded, adaptable education, studies focusing on the impact of the pandemic on individual school districts are lacking. The present study aims to contribute to our current understanding of the impact of COVID-19 on education by addressing whether mode of instruction (virtual, in-person, hybrid) in the 2020-2021 academic year influenced progress on the ILEARN assessment and MAP Growth test scores within a northern Indiana school district. The benefits of conducting a study comprised of students from a single district are many: students had the same access to facilities; same computer resources (one-to-one computing); same curriculum; and same options to choose from (virtual, hybrid, in-person) regarding their education for the 2020-2021 school year. The district of interest never closed their doors during the 2020-2021 school year. As a result, some students were able to attend every school day in-person while others opted to study virtually or complete classes in a hybrid setting. We hypothesise that students who elected to remain virtual or hybrid education experienced lower scores on state assessments in comparison to students who attended school in-person during the 2020-2021 academic year.
Method

Sample

A northern Indiana school district serving 1,500* students was the focus for this analysis. This research effort was interested in students in Grades 3–8 (n = 636). The overall district population was primarily composed of White (69%) and Hispanic students (28%) and had 42% free/reduced lunch status. Representation for Grades 3–8 was similarly dispersed. The sample was 54.6% male (n = 347) and was composed of mostly White (69.7%) and Hispanic (27.2%) students. Of the 636 students, 112 were identified as special education status (17.6%), 14.3% were identified English learners (n = 91), and seven (1.1%) had Section 504 plans. Further, 45.3% of students (n = 288) were above the poverty line.

*Rounded to protect district identity.

Materials

During the normal testing window, which happened to be between April 19 through May 14, 2021, students attending the northern Indiana school district were given the ILEARN assessment. Student scores from the MAP Growth assessment from the fall, winter, and spring administration windows were also retrieved.

Procedure

Demographic information, elected mode of instruction for the 2020-2021 semester, and ILEARN test score data were gathered for every Grade 3–8 student enrolled at the Northern Indiana school district. Data were anonymised to eliminate any personally identifiable information.

Results

Mode of Instruction

As mentioned previously, the school district of interest was fortunate to keep its doors open throughout the entire 2020-2021 school year despite the turmoil and challenges presented to all schools in the long season of COVID-19. Most students within this district elected to pursue their education in-person, (n = 528, 83.0%). Out of all 108 virtual learners, 86 students took classes in a hybrid style, with time spent on virtual education ranging from 2–143 virtual days. The remaining students (n = 22) completed all 180 school days completely virtually.

We were interested in determining whether there were student-level patterns (e.g., achievement) across modality of instruction, particularly students who were enrolled in virtual classes at any frequency and students who attended completely in-person for the 2020-2021 school year. We assessed this by analysing student RIT scores across the fall, winter, and spring testing, being mindful of group membership (virtual, hybrid, or in-person).
ILEARN

ILEARN scores in mathematics, language arts, science, and social studies from the 2020-2021 testing year were collected for students at the school of interest. Worth noting is that it is only students in Grades 4 and 6 who participate in the ILEARN science assessment; similarly, the social studies assessment includes only Grade 5 students. Relative proficiency in subjects on ILEARN assessments is interpreted on a grade-to-grade basis; therefore, information related to the relative proficiency in each subject will be reported. Using grade-specific cut levels, a student’s proficiency was measured as either below, approaching, at, or above proficiency.

Mathematics

In mathematics, the distribution was nearly even across all levels of proficiencies. Most students were considered below proficiency ($n = 175, 27.5\%$), followed by approaching proficiency ($n = 160, 25.2\%$), then at proficiency ($n = 156, 24.5\%$). The remaining $22.5\%$ were above proficiency. A chi-square test of independence, which considered whether the proficiency level of students in mathematics (below or approaching proficiency, at or above proficiency) was dependent on modality of instruction, showed that there was not a relationship between proficiency level and mode of instruction, $p > .05$. Next, we were interested in investigating whether there were significant differences in mathematics ILEARN scores across the modes of instruction. See Table 1 for descriptive statistics on ILEARN mathematics scores by grade and modality.

Table 1

**ILEARN Mathematics Scores**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Virtual (180 days)</th>
<th>Hybrid (&lt; 180 days)</th>
<th>In-Person</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>6438.29</td>
<td>25.54</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>6336.00</td>
<td>---</td>
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<td>6494.00</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
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<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>6475.81</td>
<td>72.09</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Due to a small number of cases in each grade of virtual students, the following analyses were conducted comparing virtual and hybrid students as a group to in-person students. Six independent sample $t$-tests (one per grade level) were conducted to investigate whether mathematics ILEARN scores differed across students who participated fully in-person and those who had at least two days of virtual instruction for each grade. Each of these analyses yielded
nonsignificant results, \( ps > .05 \), suggesting that mathematics scores were comparable between each modality of instruction within each grade.

**Language Arts**

The distribution of the 633 students that completed the Language Arts ILEARN assessment were similarly distributed, but the highest percentage of students were considered to be below proficiency (\( n = 204, 32.2\% \)). Approaching proficiency included 150 students (23.7%), 178 students were at proficiency (28.1%), and finally, 100 students were above proficiency (15.8%). A chi-square test of independence revealed that proficiency level in language arts (below or approaching, at or above) was not dependent on mode of instruction chosen for the 2020-2021 school year, \( p > .05 \). Further analyses were conducted to determine whether scores in language arts differed across virtual and in-person learners. Table 2 provides information on ILEARN language arts scores comparing students in each mode of instruction.

**Table 2**

**ILEARN Language Arts Scores**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Virtual (180 days)</th>
<th>Hybrid (&lt; 180 days)</th>
<th>In-Person</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>( M )</td>
<td>( SD )</td>
<td>( n )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>5434.67</td>
<td>2.52</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>5405.00</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>5510.57</td>
<td>57.56</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>5452.50</td>
<td>55.86</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>5529.80</td>
<td>76.88</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>5546.33</td>
<td>58.96</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5498.86</td>
<td>67.67</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Independent samples \( t \)-tests comparing online students (virtual and hybrid) and in-person learners were conducted at each grade level to compare the mean language arts scores between virtual and in-person learners. None of these analyses were significant, \( ps > .05 \), suggesting that scores on language arts did not differ across learning modalities.

**Science**

Ninety-one Grade 4 students and 97 Grade 6 students (\( n = 188 \)) took the science ILEARN assessment. Most students were below (\( n = 67, 35.6\% \)) or approaching (\( n = 55, 29.3\% \)) proficiency, with the remaining students being at (\( n = 47, 25.0\% \)) or above (\( n = 19, 10.1\% \)) proficiency in science. A chi-square test of independence that addressed whether science proficiency (below or approaching, at or above) was dependent on being an in-person or virtual learner was non-significant, \( p > .05 \), allowing us to determine that performance was independent of mode of instruction.
Next, we were interested in determining whether scores on the science ILEARN assessment differed amongst learners in the two types of instruction. Of the Grade 4 students, 15 were virtual learners. Similarly, 14 Grade 6 students in this group participated in virtual learning. Independent samples \( t \)-tests showed that there were not significant differences in the scores of virtual (\( M = 7465.13, SD = 54.38 \)) and in-person (\( M = 7480.20, SD = 46.79 \)) Grade 4 students, or Grade 6 students that participated in virtual (\( M = 74\).85.43, \( SD = 27.62 \)) and in-person (\( M = 7490.90, SD = 42.81 \)), \( p_s > .05 \).

**Social Studies**

There were 105 Grade 5 students that took the social studies ILEARN assessment. Most of these students were below proficiency level (\( n = 41, 39.0\% \)), followed by at proficiency level (\( n = 28, 26.7\% \)), then above (\( n = 19, 18.1\% \)) and approaching (\( n = 17, 16.2\% \)) levels. To address whether proficiency in social studies was dependent on mode of instruction, a chi-square test of independence was conducted. The results were not significant, \( p > .05 \), suggesting that proficiency in social studies was not significantly related to whether students participated in virtual or in-person learning.

Furthermore, we sought to determine whether scores in social studies differed between in-person and virtual learners. Eighteen of these students were virtual students and the remaining 87 participated in in-person learning. An independent samples \( t \)-test revealed that the mean scores for virtual (\( M = 8482.00, SD = 43.80 \)) and in-person (\( M = 8498.09, SD = 54.78 \)) did not differ significantly, \( p > .05 \).

**MAP Growth**

This section details the analyses specific to the MAP growth assessment. First, we report the descriptive statistics regarding the sample. Then, we move onto descriptives regarding group membership, using inferential statistics to drive our investigation on whether student progress was dependent on group membership (virtual vs in-person instruction). Normality assumptions were checked and met for all variables in the upcoming analyses.

**Mathematics**

In general, growth across the semesters, which is expected, was noted. In the fall, the average math RIT score was \( M = 210.18, SD = 21.97 \), and increased to \( M = 216.55, SD = 19.52 \) in the winter and to \( M = 222.67, SD = 19.99 \) in the spring. In total, this reflects an average growth of 12.50 points. This analysis reflected the math RIT scores of 100 virtual learners and 502 in-person learners. Traditional, in-person learners had average RIT scores of \( M = 209.61, SD = 22.45 \) in the fall, \( M = 216.92, SD = 19.54 \) in the winter, and \( M = 223.57, SD = 20.33 \) in the spring. Mean RIT scores for virtual learners was \( M = 212.98, SD = 19.50 \) in the fall, \( M = 218.63, SD = 19.23 \) in the winter, and \( M = 222.08, SD = 17.78 \) in the spring. Virtual learners slightly surpassed in-person learners in the fall and winter semesters, but scores levelled in the spring semester.
To analyse whether there was an association between mathematics RIT scores from inperson and virtual learners among each time point, a mixed within-between analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted. Mauchly’s Test of Sphericity demonstrated that the assumption of sphericity was not met, $\chi^2(2) = 212.76, p < .001$. Consequently, Greenhouse-Geisser-corrected output was interpreted. Levene’s test of homogeneity showed that the homogeneity of variance assumption was met at each time point ($p_s = .088, .543,$ and .119, respectively). The results of the mixed within-between ANOVA demonstrated that there was a significant difference between RIT scores in each measurement period, $F(1.55, 923.82) = 89.98, p < .001, \eta^2_{\text{partial}} = .13$. Reference to Bonferroni-corrected pairwise comparisons showed that statistically significant improvement in math RIT scores was noted between fall ($M = 211.30$) and winter ($M = 217.78$), $t(600) = 6.72, p < .001$, fall and spring ($M = 222.82$), $t(600) = 19.87, p < .001$, and between winter and spring time points, $t(600) = 5.15, p < .001$. There was not a significant difference in the mean RIT score of virtual ($M = 217.90$) and in-person ($M = 216.70$) learners, $p = .553$.

In addition to a significant main effect for semester, the mixed within-between ANOVA demonstrated that there was a significant interaction between the time points and mode of instruction, Greenhouse-Geisser $F(1.54, 923.82) = 4.12, p = .026, \eta^2_{\text{partial}} = .007$. However, the Bonferroni-corrected pairwise comparisons did not point to statistically significant differences between groups at any measurement point, $p_s > .05$. Essentially, both in-person and virtual learners demonstrated similar upward trends in mathematics RIT scores throughout the course of the 2020-2021 school year.

**Language Usage**

Between the fall and the spring semesters, the MAP Growth Language Usage RIT scores increased by 8.32 points. In the fall, the average RIT score was $M = 201.82$, $SD = 18.32$, and increased to $M = 207.26$, $SD = 15.62$ in the winter, and then $M = 210.14$, $SD = 15.21$ in the spring. Ninety-two virtual students and 497 in-person students were included in the following analysis for having complete language usage information at each time point. For in-person learners, the mean RIT score for language usage was $M = 201.535$, $SD = 18.92$ for fall, $M = 206.97$, $SD = 16.19$ for winter, and $M = 210.25$, $SD = 15.44$ for spring. Virtual learners averaged $M = 203.65$, $SD = 14.98$ for fall, $M = 208.022$, $SD = 13.51$ for winter, and $M = 210.01$, $SD = 13.99$ for spring. For language usage, virtual learners had slightly higher average RIT scores in the fall and winter and seemed to meet in the spring semester.

A mixed within-between ANOVA was conducted to determine whether virtual students differed from students in the traditional classroom on language arts RIT scores over the fall, winter, and spring semesters. Mauchly’s test of Sphericity indicated that the assumption of sphericity was violated, $\chi^2(2) = 18.67, p < .001$; therefore, Greenhouse-Geisser corrections will be reported. Further, Levene’s Test of Equality of Error Variances demonstrated that the homogeneity of variance assumption was violated for the fall semester, $p = .023$, but that the assumption was met for subsequent semesters ($p_s = .058$ and .247, respectively). The analysis revealed that while a significant difference was detected among RIT scores across the time points, $F(1.94, 1138.30) = 111.84, p < .001, \eta^2_{\text{partial}} = .16$, a significant interaction was not present, $p = .072$. Essentially, this means that virtual and in-person students did not differ substantially on
their MAP Growth Language Usage progress throughout the 2020-2021 school year. Bonferroni-corrected pairwise comparisons of each time point showed significantly different trends between the fall ($M = 202.59$) and winter ($M = 207.49$), $t(587) = 9.14, p < .001$, the fall and spring ($M = 210.13$), $t(587) = 14.20, p < .001$, and the winter and spring time points, $t(587) = 5.69, p < .001$. In sum, both types of students showed similar upward progress in their language usage capacities as normally expected in traditional settings.

**Reading**

For reading, the average RIT score was $M = 202.91$, $SD = 19.98$ in the fall, $M = 208.98$, $SD = 17.44$ in the winter, and $M = 210.42$, $SD = 17.05$ in the spring, demonstrating an average growth of 7.52. Compared to math (average growth = 12.50) and language usage (average growth = 8.32), reading RIT scores revealed the smallest amount of growth. Reading RIT scores were available for 494 in-person learners and 93 students who participated in virtual learning. In-person learners had mean RIT scores of $M = 202.98$, $SD = 20.13$ in the fall, $M = 208.95$, $SD = 17.94$ in the winter, and $M = 210.79$, $SD = 17.22$ in the spring. Mean reading RIT scores for virtual learners was $M = 203.50$, $SD = 18.97$ in the fall, $M = 210.01$, $SD = 14.73$ in the winter, and $M = 210.93$, $SD = 14.48$ in the spring. Based on these mean scores, considerable progress was made between fall and the winter measurement points, with scores staying relatively the same between the winter and spring semesters.

Following suit of the previous investigations, a mixed within-between ANOVA was conducted to assess whether differences in reading RIT scores were present amongst virtual and in-person learners at each measurement point in the 2020-2021 semester. The assumption of sphericity was violated, as Mauchly’s Test of Sphericity was significant, $\chi^2(2) = 34.04, p < .001$. Greenhouse-Geisser statistics were interpreted to make up for this assumption violation. The homogeneity of variance assumption was met at all three time points ($ps = .957$, .220, and .111, respectively). The main effect of time was significant, $F(1.89, 1107.30) = 113.46, p < .001, \eta^2_{partial} = .16$. Bonferroni-correct pairwise comparisons showed that there were significant differences detected at each measurement period, [fall ($M = 203.24$) and winter ($M = 209.48$), $t(585) = 12.00$, fall and spring ($M = 210.86$), $t(858) = 12.74$, winter and spring, $t(585) = 2.80, ps < .05$]. These results point to improvement in reading at each time point, as would be anticipated throughout the school year. Notably, a significant interaction was not found within these cases, $p = .682$.

**Discussion**

Although learning losses were documented and experienced widely during the pandemic following the switch to online learning, the school district described in this study did not experience significantly differing outcomes between students engaged in online learning, hybrid, and in-person learning. The lack of significant differences in standardised test scores between students engaged in online, in-person, and hybrid learning gives credence to the idea that all formats of schooling can be effective when educators and students have the correct tools in their
toolkit. These findings directly contradict prior studies demonstrating differences in academic outcomes during the pandemic based on learning modality. For example, Xing and Saghian (2022) uncovered more desirable learning outcomes for in-person modalities of instruction within Chinese public universities. Although studies often compare in-person learning outcomes before the pandemic to online learning outcomes during the pandemic (i.e., Feng et al., 2021), we are unaware of studies comparing these modalities of instruction to one another during the pandemic, using the same population of students. Within the school district studied, leadership had provided extensive technological training to staff members prior to the pandemic so that when the necessity for online learning arose, teachers were prepared to implement online instruction well. Since students had their own electronic devices already, many technology issues faced during the pandemic were circumvented.

While this lack of difference between online, in-person, and virtual learning environments differed from the expected outcomes (i.e., the expected outcome of lower achievement for students learning online), the school district in question provided much more extensive training on virtual tools and equipment for staff and students prior to the pandemic, which may have blunted the impact other institutions experienced when transitioning from in-person to online learning. This finding aligns with and expands upon prior literature suggesting that technical issues and lack of technical skills of both students and teachers may influence perceptions of online learning (Coman et al., 2020; Dolighan & Owens, 2021; Ferri et al., 2020; Konig et al., 2020; Sing et al., 2021; Trust & Whalen, 2021). Our findings suggest that training and access to technical tools do not solely influence perceptions of online learning but also impact outcomes associated with online learning. Experimental findings align with this conclusion, as studies prior to the pandemic demonstrate that training teachers can positively impact coping abilities and emotional intelligence (Pozo-Rico et al., 2020). However, there is a need for empirical studies investigating the direct role of technology training for teachers on student academic outcomes in online courses.

The inconclusive nature of literature comparing hybrid, in-person, and online formats also supports the idea that various factors other than whether a class is meeting in-person influence the success of an educational program. Future work assessing the efficacy of various modalities of instruction should dig deeper than simply comparing online to in-person formats, instead collecting data on various factors that may influence the success of a program. Additionally, though there are benefits associated with using standardised tests as an outcome measure, such examinations might not capture the whole picture. Future work should investigate multiple types of outcome measurements.

Although this study contributes to the literature on learning modalities and brings to light factors that may influence the efficacy of online instruction (i.e., training), outcomes were only analysed over the course of one academic year. Future studies may consider looking at outcomes over a longer period of time in order to determine whether students enrolled in online instruction exhibit test scores that vary from students who received in-person or hybrid instruction several years later; are there learning differences that can be detected or come to light years following the COVID-19 pandemic that were undetectable over a shorter period? One of the difficulties of tracking impact over time is the relatively short time span that each grade configuration permits for intense study. Elementary at its best, in a kindergarten through fifth grade schedule, offers six
years of study. Middle school, with sixth through eighth grade, allows for three years of study. High school offers only a four-year time span. Longitudinal studies may provide further information about the influence of various instructional modalities.

Moreover, the literature also demonstrates that the pandemic had a disproportionate impact on Black, Latino, indigenous, immigrant, and low-income households. While our analysis compared student outcomes based on the modality of instruction, the analyses did not consider the influence of other key variables. Future work in this arena may compare outcomes by modality and utilise potential influential factors (such as race and socioeconomic status) as covariates.

**Conclusion**

Our study provides strong evidence for within-school factors that influence the success of online and hybrid learning programs. We postulate that school leadership’s focus on practical technological literacy for teachers and the distribution of electronic devices to students played a major role in the relative success of online learning during the pandemic. This aligns with prior research that suggests key challenges for other educators during the pandemic centred around lack of computer literacy and training specific to teaching online. Teachers within this school district seemed to experience fewer challenges due to the early implementation of one-to-one technology and full integration of that technology with the school’s curricular approach.

For leaders, this district’s experiences serve as an example of how thinking ahead and innovating can influence school outcomes. In the words of Robert F. Kennedy, “Some men see things as they are, and ask why. I dream of things that never were, and ask why not?” The superintendent in this school district asked “Why not?” when implementing one-to-one technology and technology literacy training. During the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the school district’s access to technological tools and skills created a level playing field for students who may have lacked access to technology otherwise. Everyone had the resources they needed to learn, which influenced the success of online instruction. Although COVID-19 is often described as the cause of learning loss, the impact of disasters can be mitigated when measures are taken to prepare for them. Although the preparation by this school district (providing devices for students and training staff and students on technology use) may not have been in preparation for a pandemic, it seems to have influenced learning outcomes. This district’s experience can be used as a model for disaster preparedness in educational settings.

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How Principal Professional Development Supports Instructional Leadership Needs and Interests

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ABSTRACT: This qualitative exploration is an original study of how professional development (PD) supports principals as instructional leaders considering their changing roles. Research questions were: What types of PD do principals and principal supervisors find most useful for developing instructional leadership skills? What are benefits and challenges of participating in PD designed for the principalship? Of the 16 respondents to the demographic survey, five elementary principals, four secondary principals, and three principal supervisors from two school divisions in a southeastern U.S. state were interviewed. Regarding findings, principals reported that the PD they completed built capacity for teaching and learning and expanded networks; while some had the freedom to choose among PD topics, constraints limited everyone’s involvement. Principal supervisors indicated having used evidence-based practices and data to determine principal PD opportunities. In the interest of school administrator quality, the findings could help catalyse principal-specific PD for positively impacting student achievement.

Key words: Instructional leadership, principal, principal professional development (PD), principal supervisor, student achievement
Introduction

The role of school principal has grown in complexity, with little time allocated for leadership development and policy contexts, let alone for the “aesthetics of leading” (English & Ehrich, 2016, p. 209). As one disconcerting consequence, principal turnover, more prevalent in schools with underserved populations and low/declining academic performance, has undermined school outcomes and quality education for students (Grissom et al., 2021). Moreover, high principal attrition has weakened school divisions’ ability to hire diverse principals to serve as positive role models (Tran et al., 2023).

In response, building administrators need quality professional development (PD) to better prepare them for their crucial role. Guidance in the virtually powered world of education facilitates principals’ positive impact on teaching and learning (Irby et al., 2022). Ample research exists on principals’ influence in supporting school improvement (see Herrmann et al., 2019). Also, growing evidence suggests that principal learning can be linked to increased student achievement and reduced teacher turnover (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022). However, based on our review of current studies on principal PD in the (post)pandemic era, how principals engage in PD to improve their instructional leadership skills lacks thorough examination. As found, principals’ sense-making of PD and its most beneficial aspects are not well known (Sahlin, 2023; Westberry & Hornor, 2022). The tendency for leadership preparation (and presumably principal PD) to be geared around evidence based or best practice discourages the search for alternative strategies and experimentation with technologies and methods (English & Ehrich, 2016).

Intending to conduct original research, we pursued qualitative study of principals’ PD learning and effectiveness as instructional leaders considering their changing roles. As a state-level school quality coordinator at the time of this study and educational leadership professor, we were interested in the perceptions of both principals and principal supervisors who have practical knowledge about our topic and an investment in student achievement. We sought to identify (a) the types of PD principals and principal supervisors find beneficial in developing instructional leadership skills, along with perceived benefits and challenges of principal PD, and (b) the potential impact of principal PD on instructional leadership practice and quality education.

Specifically, our research purpose was to determine how principal PD can best support principals’ instructional leadership skills development in the interest of school administrator quality. Two research questions shaped our inquiry: What types of PD do principals and principal supervisors find most useful for developing instructional leadership skills? What are benefits and challenges of participating in PD (virtual, hybrid, and in-person) designed for the principalship?

Here, our writing goal is to describe principals’ and principal supervisors’ present involvement in principal-specific PD from their respective positions. The article moves to our conceptual framework, followed by sections that address the literature reviewed, methodology, study findings and discussion, and conclusions and implications.
Conceptual Framework: Influences on Principal Development

Our conceptual framework for the review portion of our study (Figure 1) presents a causal model of various factors influencing student achievement: policy, change, leadership, equity, divisions, benefits, barriers, and impacts (Mullen & Hall, 2001).

Figure 1

Influences on Principal Development


Darling-Hammond et al.’s (2022) literature review was among the key sources influencing the construction of our conceptual framework. Their study focused on programmatic elements of effective PD for aspiring and practicing principals (e.g., mentoring/coaching) and associated experiences for participants. We analysed the main influences that drive principal PD on the job, with student achievement as the overriding goal. However, Darling-Hammond et al. also acknowledged the role of policy in driving quality PD programs, as well as “equity-oriented leadership” in developing principals to meet diverse student needs. PD supporting principals’
changing roles as equity-oriented leaders is recognised in our conceptual paper (Mullen & Hall, 2024).

Our display identifies and connects crucial influences on principal PD for cultivating student achievement. As depicted, legislation and policy—a foundational catalyst—prioritise student achievement and, to this end, propel changes in the principal role, shape equity-oriented school leadership, support principal leadership by school divisions, and guide measurable improvement and impacts on schools (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022; Gooden et al., 2018; Grissom et al., 2021; Levin et al., 2021; Lopez & Jean-Marie, 2021; Stephenson et al., 2021).

When statutes and policies requiring principal PD are not fully implemented, principals might falter in their learning and effectiveness (Haller et al., 2016; Manna, 2015; Rodriguez, 2019). Consequently, to satisfy the expectations for delivering effective principal PD, school divisions are required to determine approaches for meeting policy requirements and offer equity-oriented, comprehensive, and differentiated learning based on need (Acton, 2021; Darling-Hammond et al., 2022; Lavigne et al., 2016; Westberry & Zhao, 2021; Zepeda et al., 2014). Divisions have a crucial role in determining appropriate PD opportunities for principals and targeting areas of growth, including how they understand and operationalise equity. The expected result is more effectual, equity-minded, and skilled leadership (Grissom et al., 2021; Lopez & Jean-Marie, 2021; Stephenson et al., 2021).

Principals look to their divisions and beyond for targeted PD opportunities (Irby et al., 2022). As reported by the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (2020), they value principal leadership standards and expectations that “emphasize growth” and offer ways to “engage in instructional leadership and build the capacity of others” that allow for planning, goal setting, and influence through “high-impact actions” (para. 2) in “specific areas of practice.” Strategies for “strengthening teacher instructional capacity” (para. 14) are welcome. Principal supervision oriented around support (evidence-based and reflective) rather than compliance is desired. Outstanding principal supervisors ensure strong instructional leadership in schools.

Critiquing our framework using the “leading beautifully” concept of English and Ehrich (2016), we recognise that it does not address the prevailing influence of neoliberal ideology that measures student performance on standardised tests and school outcomes. Our model would also need to be reimagined to consider principal leadership and development from the perspective of the whole human being they bring to the forefront. This criticism applies to our study design.

**Literature Reviewed**

**Review Process**

Peer-reviewed studies of principal PD, mainly in the U.S. context, were located from 2014–March 2024 through databases (EBSCOhost, etc.) and web search engines. Search terms with yields included PD (2,796), instructional leadership (118), principal role and student achievement (85), and virtual (6). Articles and books (68) were analysed, as well as reports.
Central Definitions

Descriptive definitions of the central terms in our study appear in Table 1.

Table 1

Research-Informed Central Terms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Sources</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Instructional leadership</td>
<td>Lacking universal meaning (see Munna’s [2023] international study), <em>instructional leadership</em> varies depending on the setting (e.g., in small schools instructional leaders may be “hands-on” whereas in larger schools they may build staff’s “leadership capacity”). However, instructional leadership “focuses on improving teaching and learning,” and “all instructional leaders [influence] learning outcomes” (p. 39). Strategies are used for conducting teacher observations, evaluations, and coaching and for developing data-driven instructional programs.</td>
<td>Grissom et al. (2021); Munna, 2023; Peterson (2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal PD</td>
<td>Not simply in-service training, principal PD requires an instructional leadership orientation, and is a continuing “form of leadership of learning”; through PD opportunities for learning, principals develop the adaptive capabilities necessary for effective leadership and practice (Munna, 2023, p. 39). PD opportunities are designed for principals that enable them to give teachers useful feedback, which in turn improves classroom pedagogy and practice; also, the coach or mentor support received by principals is personalised; networking and learning activities are also provided.</td>
<td>Darling-Hammond et al. (2022); Grissom et al. (2021); Munna, 2023; Peterson (2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal supervisor</td>
<td>A division leader (director of secondary education, etc.) who directly supervises principals and evaluates their instructional leadership skills and effectiveness.</td>
<td>Honig &amp; Rainey (2020)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virtual and hybrid PD</td>
<td><em>Internet-delivered PD in synchronous and asynchronous formats (uses online modules, etc.); synchronous learning involves live encounters via webinars, etc. (virtual PD), whereas hybrid PD has elements of in-person and online activity.</em></td>
<td>Gottlieb et al. (2020); Parsons et al. (2019); Perry (2023)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2 presents six influences on effective principal PD from our review. We noted researcher assumptions across the studies analysed: principal PD is essential for the effectiveness of leaders in instructional leadership and accountability for student achievement, and strategy implementation from PD sessions supports areas of improvement and sustainable outcomes.

### Table 2

**Influences on Effective Principal PD From Studies**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Finding</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Studies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Principal PD considerations and importance</td>
<td>Principal PD is coherent, focused, and designed to arrive at expected outcomes. It embeds activities that build upon previous PD, and is linked to standards and assessments and personalised around educators’ needs and goals. Quality PD elicits improvements in school performance. To increase educator proficiency and desirable results for students, PD includes research on change and sustained support for implementation.</td>
<td>Cox &amp; Mullen (2023); Darling-Hammond et al. (2022); Grissom et al. (2021); Herrmann et al. (2019); Lavigne et al. (2016); Levin et al. (2021); Manna (2015); Zepeda et al. (2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changes in principal role and reasons for PD</td>
<td>PD is needed specifically for principals; thus, researchers underscore that accountability for student performance necessitates strong instructional leadership. Accompanying these changing expectations of the role is an adjustment in leaders’ skills and use of time. Principals’ roles are complicated and demanding. As they spend more time guiding and evaluating teachers’ performance, including their online competency and digital literacy, their workload expands, without extra resources.</td>
<td>Argyropoulou et al. (2021); Grissom et al. (2021); Haller et al. (2016); Lavigne et al. (2016)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Types and practices of PD benefiting principals</td>
<td>Customised PD develops the knowledge, mindset, and skills to support effective instruction. To demonstrate problem-solving and distributed leadership, leaders need targeted opportunities for executing state goals.</td>
<td>Acton (2021); Coenen et al. (2021); Jerdborg (2023); Lavigne et al. (2016); Levin et al. (2021); Manna (2015); Westberry &amp; Zhao (2021); Zepeda et al. (2014)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How Principal Professional Development Supports Instructional Leadership Needs and Interests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Finding</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Studies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Barriers to engaging in principal PD</td>
<td>Principals want to participate in PD but encounter obstacles. They might be too consumed with teachers’ PD and learning to consider their own (as evidenced during emergency remote teaching in the pandemic).</td>
<td>Argyropoulou et al. (2021); Darling-Hammond et al. (2022); Honig &amp; Rainey (2020); Levin et al. (2021); Mullen &amp; Hall (2024); Zepeda et al. (2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virtual PD platforms and their value</td>
<td>Virtual platforms used for principal PD and their value was another finding. The pivot to online learning for K–12 students triggered by COVID-19 disrupted professional learning and delivery. Virtual PD occurred out of necessity, with practitioners adjusting to online platforms and digital learning.</td>
<td>Eddy et al. (2021); Gottlieb et al. (2020); Lavigne et al. (2016); Lazenby et al. (2020); Parsons et al. (2019); Sider et al. (2023); Stephenson et al. (2021)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leveraging virtual PD to support impact</td>
<td>Virtual PD and leveraging it to support principals’ impact addresses targeted opportunities (online coaching, etc.). A district’s blended principal coaching program successfully pivoted online in five schools (Ermeling et al., 2015). Blended models can usefully maintain PD and principal coaching.</td>
<td>Charteris et al. (2021); Coenen et al. (2021); Ermeling et al. (2015); Irby et al. (2022); Lambert &amp; Bouchamma (2021); Lazenby et al. (2020); Parsons et al. (2019); Peterson (2002); Stephenson et al. (2021)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Methodology**

**Approvals and Ethics**

Permission to conduct this research was granted by our university’s institutional review board (April 18, 2023, #23-428) and two school divisions. The rural and suburban divisions in a southeastern U.S. state were approached with the intent of hearing perspectives from different sites. Both divisions had enough schools to draw upon for involvement, and Rebecca Hall (coauthor) was not an employee. Practitioners voluntarily participated and could withdraw at any time.

**Research Design**

Principals and principal supervisors (rural and suburban) were surveyed then interviewed. We assumed they were well positioned to explain what PD may be most beneficial for developing principals’ instructional leadership skills from the vantage point of school leaders
who directly experience the PD and principal supervisors who evaluate their effectiveness. Based on current performance standards for principals from the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE, 2022) that address instructional leadership, principal supervisors evaluate principals within their charge on (a) implementation of instructional leadership skills, (b) student progress resulting from their leadership skills, and (c) continuous engagement in PD for positive impact on school effectiveness and contributions to the profession.

**Instruments and Data Collection Procedures**

All principals/supervisors completed both the demographic survey and interview.

**Survey**

We selected items for our basic demographic survey from school studies with principal demographics. Principals were prompted to specify their current position, total years as principal, number of school divisions served in this role, school level (elementary, middle, or high), and division type (rural or suburban), as well as age range, gender identification, and race/ethnicity. Questions were the same for principal supervisors and rephrased to fit their role. (Table 5 contains the complete data profile.) An invitation containing the survey was emailed to potential respondents in both divisions. Purposeful sampling from the surveys ensured that our stipulated criteria were met and a varied participant sample was represented.

**Interview**

This protocol (Table 3) was aligned with studies we reviewed. Also, it was validated based on feedback from four educational leadership professors and a provider of principal PD (former principal). Upon completion of the online demographic survey, one-on-one semi-structured interviews were held with principals and principal supervisors. Clarifying questions were asked in response to replies to encourage elaboration. Interviews were conducted by the first researcher on Zoom. The software produced transcriptions of the spoken content.

Our interview protocol was not shared in advance: the prompts addressed personal experiences and thus did not require preparation. We also wanted to elicit unplanned and genuine responses. For the member checking, eight participants confirmed the accuracy of their transcriptions (lightly edited for readability); four did not reply but had been informed that a nonresponse would signal approval. A fresh recall of details and a more complete record for analysis purposes resulted from researcher notes taken during and after interviews.

Table 3 (research-aligned interview protocol) was used with principals, and Table 4 (adjusted version) with principal supervisors. Questions were phrased according to their occupational role relative to principal-specific PD: principal as the subject of this learning and principal supervisor as sponsor/evaluator of principals’ PD-related effectiveness. Our interviewing procedures followed qualitative recommendations (e.g., Creswell & Poth, 2018).
Table 3

Principal Interview Protocol With Corresponding Research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Research Studies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Describe your recent experiences with virtual PD designed specifically to support development of your instructional leadership skills. How often were the sessions? What platforms were used?</td>
<td>Charteris et al. (2021); Irby et al. (2022); Parsons et al. (2019)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Describe your recent experiences with hybrid PD designed to support development of your instructional leadership skills. How often were the sessions? What platforms were used?</td>
<td>Eddy et al. (2021)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Describe your recent experiences with in-person PD designed to support development of your instructional leadership skills. How often were the sessions? What locations were used?</td>
<td>Darling-Hammond et al. (2022); Grissom et al. (2021); Lavigne et al. (2016); Manna (2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Provide an example of when the content learned in a PD session improved your instructional leadership skills.</td>
<td>Herrmann et al. (2019); Steinberg &amp; Yang (2020)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. How might your acquired instructional leadership skills influence student achievement? If there has been no impact, why?</td>
<td>Acton (2021)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. What are benefits of participating in PD designed for principals?</td>
<td>Lazenby et al. (2020); Levin et al. (2021); Zepeda et al. (2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. What are challenges of participating in PD designed for principals?</td>
<td>Westberry &amp; Zhao (2021)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4

**Principal Supervisor Interview Protocol**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Describe the types of virtual PD provided to principals to support the development of their instructional leadership skills. How often were the sessions? What platforms were used?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Describe the types of hybrid PD provided to principals to support the development of their instructional leadership skills. How often were the sessions? What platforms were used?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Describe the types of in-person PD provided to principals to support the development of their instructional leadership skills. How often were the sessions? What locations were used?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>What is an example of when content from a PD session improved principals’ instructional leadership skills?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>What is an example of when content learned in a principal PD session might have positively impacted student achievement? Describe the PD session (format, length, audience, etc.).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>What are benefits of principals participating in PD designed for them?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>What are challenges of principals participating in PD designed for them?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>How does your school division decide which PD principals attend? Do you provide options to principals?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* The same studies apply for Table 4 (as Table 3), with additions (e.g., Honig & Rainey, 2020).

**Participants**

Sixteen of 95 potential participants responded to our demographic survey (17% response rate). Nine principals and three principal supervisors (N = 12, 75%) were in the interview pool. Purposeful sampling ensured principal representation at different school levels and years in the role. Accordingly, the sample reflected these inclusion criteria: years of experience by principals who were novice (1–3 years) and experienced (4 or more years), as well as varied school levels (i.e., elementary and secondary). In the rural division, the principal supervisor interviewed was responsible for evaluating all principals, whereas in the suburban division, one supervisor had oversight for the elementary schools and the other for middle schools. Eight participants were in the suburban context and four in the rural; six were novices (one of whom was a supervisor) and six experienced principals and supervisors. Ethnically, seven identified as White and five Black; gender identification was also distributed, with eight females and four males (Table 5).
Table 5

Demographics of Principal and Principal Supervisor Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person ID</th>
<th>Division</th>
<th>School level</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Age range</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race/ethnicity</th>
<th>Years in role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PRE1</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>30–39</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>1–3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRS2</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>30–39</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>1–3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRE3</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>30–39</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>4–7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PSE4</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>40–49</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>1–3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PSE5</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>40–49</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>1–3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PSE6</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>30–39</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>1–3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PSE7</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>40–49</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>4–7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PSS8</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>40–49</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>4–7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PSS9</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>50–59</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>8–12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

PRINCIPAL SUPERVISOR

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person ID</th>
<th>Division</th>
<th>School level</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Age range</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race/ethnicity</th>
<th>Years in role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SR1</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>40–49</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>4–7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SS2</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>50–59</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>4–7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SS3</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>40–49</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>1–3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. PRE = rural elementary principal, PRS = rural secondary principal, PSE = suburban elementary principal, PSS = suburban secondary principal, SR = rural principal supervisor, SS = suburban principal supervisor.

Data Coding and Analysis

All data were organised in Microsoft Excel spreadsheets (with participant unique identifiers assigned) and securely stored on Google Drive. Next, demographic survey responses were tabulated and summarised, and interview data (transcriptions and researcher notes) were coded. The two researchers closely read the interview data and independently colour-coded the data using deductive codes (derived from research questions and search terms): benefit of PD (BPD), challenge of PD (CPD), etc. Inductive codes included choice (CHO), time (TIM), and more.

When comparing our coding results and tentatively identifying themes, we also distinguished between (a) rural and suburban participant responses, (b) novice and experienced principal responses, and (c) principal and principal supervisor responses. Then two peers with coding experience reviewed our coded data set, with comparisons drawn to account for any researcher omissions and biases. These analytical steps, having confirmed interrater reliability, produced findings with supporting evidence from data that aligned with our research questions. Participants’ quotes in the transcribed record were lightly edited to assist with readability.
Limitations/Delimitations

Data collection was limited to data reported by public school principals and supervisors from a single U.S. state. Delimitations were that two different divisions constituted research sites and were not associated with the coauthor’s employment (past and present).

Study Findings and Discussion

Nine findings emerged from the data. We considered a finding major if over half of participants responded similarly. Developing instructional leadership skills was a common refrain. They discussed impact on student achievement (8 participants, including all secondary principals and principal supervisors); experiences with virtual PD (10), hybrid PD (6, including 4 principals from the suburban division only), and in-person PD (12); personalisation of PD and choice (8, including 5 principals and 3 supervisors); networking during PD (7, all secondary principals and 3 elementary principals); challenge of finding time for PD (11, all principals and 2 supervisors); and deciding which PD to offer (all 3 supervisors).

There were differences in principals’ perspectives of their PD and learning according to their respective contexts. The six suburban principals described a larger breadth of experiences associated with their PD learning opportunities—national and division-level conferences, outside speakers, and coaching—whereas the three rural principals’ PD experiences were mainly internal to their division. While the rural principals also experienced coaching, it was mostly illustrated by the principal supervisor, unlike in the suburban context where the principals were able to explain how the coaching had personally benefited them and their leadership practice. Principals’ development opportunities varied based on their school division’s size, location, resources, PD-focused department and supervisors. This variability speaks to the vital influence of context on principals’ understanding and practice of leadership.

In addition to contextual differences, we found that participant groups and levels of experience differed in our analysed data. The contrasts were mainly that (a) rural principals did not mention PD experiences centred on curriculum alignment, even though their suburban counterparts did; (b) novice principals did not give an example of the impact of their acquired instructional leadership skills on student achievement collectively, unlike their experienced counterparts; and (c) all principal supervisors stated that the monthly division-level principals’ meetings were used for instructional leadership PD, but only three principals had this impression.

Principals Had Opportunities to Develop Instructional Leadership Skills Through PD and Follow-up Coaching (Finding 1)

The nine principals spoke about their participation in principal PD designed for building instructional leadership capabilities, and all three principal supervisors’ attention was on the opportunities they presented to principals. The principal PD was sponsored by the school division, as well as the VDOE, outside organisations, and conferences. PD topics targeting instructional leadership were mainly identified as conducting classroom observations and feedback (58% of our principal participants), monitoring curriculum alignment and support
(42%), establishing norms and positive school culture intently focused on instructional outcomes (42%), coaching teachers (25%), and utilising data for instructional purposes (25%). These topics are consistent with Grissom et al.’s (2021) delineation of instructional leadership and substantiate Westberry and Zhao’s (2021) claim that principals are most interested in PD on instructional leadership skills. The areas also correspond to the Code of Virginia’s (1988/2022) constitutional requirement that the state’s local school boards provide high-quality PD specifically “for principals and supervisors designed to increase proficiency in instructional leadership and management” (para. E).

Three principals mentioned PD opportunities targeted at developing their skills as coaches and how those sessions allowed them to build teachers’ capacity and create shared ownership for student learning. Learning to re-see the role of instructional leader, an elementary principal discovered that rather than being “the problem-solver” they need to frame problems and probe school situations: “My task is to say, ‘How can I support you in reaching your goals? What is your goal for your students and yourself? What do you want to improve on?’” Another similarly noted that coaching sessions had developed their questioning/paraphrasing skills and capacity to help teachers think through problems and engage collaboratively in problem-solving.

One principal and two principal supervisors reported that utilising data for instructional purposes was an advantage of principal PD. The secondary principal was able to implement data strategies to enhance teacher understanding of data-informed decision making: “I ended up expanding the Comprehensive Needs Assessment so teachers could have a voice [beyond administrators]. They delved into the data and participated more than before. Now they can tailor instruction and build unit plans around the data.”

A suburban principal supervisor confirmed that follow-up coaching had been used to support the implementation of strategies from PD engagement. As per the suburban principals, one-on-one coaching enabled “more frequent, personal conversations with opportunities to plan, then reflect after implementing those plans. That cyclical approach has been helpful.” Coaching by principal supervisors guided principals’ application of instructional leadership and skills. For instance, supervisory coaching prepared a secondary suburban principal to give teachers constructive feedback. Also as reported, the personalised coaching sessions addressed principals’ needs and school context. Accordingly, PD should engage principals in reflection and practice, with opportunities for coaching and feedback (Peterson, 2002).

A noted benefit of instructional leadership-oriented PD for principals with follow-up coaching was the effect on classroom instruction and student outcomes, as next clarified.

Partaking in PD Was Thought to Have a Positive Influence on Teacher Instructional Practices and Student Outcomes (Finding 2)

Eight principals and principal supervisors expressed that instructional leadership skills learned from PD sessions benefited teachers and students. Responses included the implementation of new strategies that enhanced student engagement and use of data for instructional decision-making. Two experienced principals and two supervisors gave examples of the positive impact principal PD had on student performance, such as improved assessments.
Unlike the experienced principals, the novices were not able to specify how the instructional strategies they implemented manifested in student performance. With the indirect influence of principals on student learning, the effects of principal PD on schools and student outcomes take time (Cox & Mullen, 2023; Haller et al., 2016). However, the topics learned in PD helped support teachers in improving outcomes for specific student groups, an experienced and a novice principal shared. The sessions on coaching skills prepared novice suburban elementary principal to have deeper conversations with teachers about individual students: “I’m hopeful that the discussions we’ve had about individual students will continue to grow teachers’ problem-solving [ability] to help more students.” The long-serving secondary suburban principal illustrated the collective impact on student outcomes from PD taken on specially designed instruction (SDI) for students with disabilities (SWD): “We [the administrators] were able to get our teachers on board with SDI.” After this action was taken, SWD performed better on state tests.

As two principal supervisors maintained, student performance results in their schools had benefited from the principal PD taken by their supervisees. The rural supervisor spoke about PD on evidence-based practices and how principals who collaborated with their teachers on applying them could see from the assessment data that student outcomes had improved; however, other schools, where the principal did not hold teachers accountable for implementing [evidence-based practices], despite having [been in the PD sessions], did not see an improvement in test scores.

A suburban supervisor referenced a virtual PD session in reading for principals to illustrate these ideas:

We saw great improvement in our English scores across the board. [This was attributed to] bringing in folks who know the program, giving principals hands-on support by walking them through how to look at the data and passages students were reading, and helping [session participants] with how to monitor instruction.

As found, principals partook in continuous PD to benefit teaching and learning, and, as next substantiated, they accessed instructional leadership-oriented PD through webinars.

**Principals Engaged in Virtual PD Through Interactive Webinars on Instructional Leadership (Finding 3)**

All principals/supervisors shared personal experiences with virtual principal PD. The division-supported opportunities were oriented around instructional leadership skills (83%). Numerous benefits were identified: interactive sessions promoting collaboration and conversation (92%), accessibility (75%), recordings/modules (58%), continuation post-COVID-19 (58%), and enduring offerings (50%). Virtual PD offered reduced costs, increased reach, scheduling flexibility, ongoing support, resource adaptability, and access to expertise. As confirmed in research, online delivery of PD requires environments that foster productive communication and other dynamics (Charteris et al., 2021; Irby et al., 2022; Sider et al., 2023).

Staying attentive and asking questions were challenges associated with PD delivered in online formats. The engagement level in synchronous online sessions, a secondary suburban
principal commented, depends on the speaker: “When a presenter did a really good job of bringing everybody into the conversation and not letting people hide behind screens, there was engagement.” Only four principals and two principal supervisors mentioned recordings or online modules. While a rural elementary principal liked having “recordings since they can be watched when convenient”, a secondary rural principal found that work distractions interfered with viewing recordings. Self-directed, asynchronous virtual PD for the principals appeared less frequently in responses. While online PD proved necessary for principals during COVID-19, it has continued, confirmed seven participants, as in: “Virtual PD is just part of what we do now, and it’s no longer considered unique” (rural elementary principal).

In addition to principals’ utilisation of virtual formats for developing instructional leadership skills, some also leveraged hybrid formats for their PD and learning.

Exposure to Hybrid PD Formats Was Limited for Developing Principals’ Instructional Leadership Skills (Finding 4)

Three principals and two principal supervisors had experienced hybrid PD formats, noting that this delivery type was less frequent than in-person or virtual PD opportunities. Nonetheless, hybrid PD offered advantages: flexible scheduling for participation, time for processing information, and continuity of connections from in-person sessions.

An elementary principal’s view of hybrid PD was “a gradual release model where we learn a new concept or skill”. Commenting on the viability of a hybrid approach to PD from a personal perspective, this individual explained: “I benefit from starting with in-person sessions; once the skills are modelled and I feel comfortable, I [implement the skills], then follow-up with virtual sessions after we’ve had time to process the information and enhance what was learned.” Similarly, researchers have found that ongoing asynchronous and synchronous sessions allow participants to change their practice over time, which makes the implementation of new material more impactful; further, hybrid formats allow for flexibility and participant preferences for engaging in PD (Eddy et al., 2021; Perry, 2023).

While there was some utilisation of hybrid formats, all principals experienced in-person PD and, overall, found this modality to be more favorable to their leadership development.

In-Person, Job-Embedded PD Propelled Learning About Instructional Leadership (Finding 5)

Eleven participants said they had been exposed to in-person PD and heightened engagement. They attributed their learning to opportunities to ask clarifying questions and participate in discussions and activities, which were advantages of PD delivered in-person. Six participants named job-embedded components of principal PD: activities, trainings, and workshops relevant to instructional leadership skills; collaboration and coaching; real-life scenarios; topics essential to teaching and learning aligned to their specific school context; up-to-date content, and so forth. Role-playing and one-on-one coaching were among the effective techniques mentioned.
Activities and collaboration during in-person PD sparked engagement, remarked eight principals. A secondary suburban principal commented that during such sessions, principals were able to dialogue around their own questions, which enhanced understanding and application of content presented. Three principals were more attentive when PD was an in-person (not online) event. They found collaborating easier—they could tackle activities, brainstorm, and discuss applications of their learning more effectively. Also preferring PD in-person, a secondary suburban principal noted that this format creates a safe environment, “allowing for more honest conversations. I worry that virtual sessions are being recorded; you don’t know who is listening.”

The three principal supervisors and two principals described coaching as an intentional practice of leadership learning. PD-infused principal meetings (e.g., whole group followed by individualised principal–principal supervisor) served as a coaching strategy for implementing content learned. To quote a suburban principal supervisor:

We provide PD when we meet with principals the first week of each month and afterwards. Our one-to-one follow-up sessions really help [ensure that the content learned is being implemented]. Anything that’s covered in our principals’ meetings is moved to the agenda for our individual sessions.

This finding supports research indicating that job-embedded learning opportunities can have positive impacts if focused on content-specific instructional leadership practices. Such opportunities are aimed at student learning, high-leverage practice areas, and unique problems (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022; Grissom et al., 2021; Zepeda et al., 2014).

In-person PD advanced principals’ leadership development, and some participants recognised the importance of having choices and personalised opportunities.

**Choice Involving PD Topics and Formats With Opportunities for Personalisation Was Available to Some Principals (Finding 6)**

Five principals noted having choice and/or opportunities to personalise their PD, while all principal supervisors said they deliberately leveraged these very benefits. While only one principal recalled being asked what format/method they wanted for their PD (virtual, etc.), five principals reported being able to choose topics for their professional learning, among them a suburban secondary principal: “This year we’ve been given more flexibility and encouraged to attend conferences. I think the notion of choice is important—there may be something that matters to me and my school like [PD on the topic of] family engagement.” The suburban principals who were in larger divisions with PD departments had options for their PD and learning. However, the rural principals were not consistently given options, so they had to initiate what they wanted to learn about. Reflecting on changes from all virtual PD to more in-person after the pandemic, a rural elementary principal stated: “A mixture of opportunities is now being offered that depends on folks’ needs and comfort level.”

Interest surveys and opportunities to attend national conferences with PD sessions were examples given by five principals and three principal supervisors. Personalised PD was available through coaching, small-group sessions, or principal requests for a specific topic. Zepeda et al. (2014) recommended that when preparing PD for principals, greater flexibility and more
autonomy should be extended for content, learning approaches, delivery type, pace, and desired outcomes. Principal PD should be aligned to role, context, and experience level. Leveraging virtual PD is one strategy for individualising principal PD opportunities at lower costs (Charteris et al., 2021; Gottlieb et al., 2020). However, Manna (2015) warned that PD targeted for principals is often designed for teachers, with principals situated as mere observers, but principals do not want to attend sessions for non-principals. PD providers need to develop principal-specific PD opportunities with choices so principals’ individual needs can be met.

Besides choice and personalised opportunities for their development as leaders, principals viewed networking as a worthwhile investment of time and noted several associated benefits.

**Networking Spawned by Principal PD Countered Isolation and Proved Valuable (Finding 7)**

Seven principals pointed to four main benefits of principal PD: networking opportunities, learning new ideas, problem-solving, and feeling less lonely. Their job could be isolating, said four principals, but networked learning and engagement helped compensate for this reality. They appreciated PD sessions that devoted time to talking through problems with others who understood the job and liked that they could speak freely: “Learning with other principals provides a sense of safety—you can be vulnerable.” Continuing, this secondary suburban principal remarked: “There may be things you need to learn that others in your building would expect you to already know, but you can put your guard down with principals. You can learn together because they understand what you’re going through.”

Networking helped reduce the isolation felt in the principal role, and breakout sessions were consequently appreciated in the different modalities. This approach worked well at an in-person PD conference for a suburban elementary principal: “Sometimes you feel like you’re out there by yourself. It’s helpful talking to other leaders with similar schools.” Likewise, to a secondary rural principal, the camaraderie built through PD sessions helped combat workplace alienation. Problem-solving and brainstorming in a safe environment are critical, noted four principals. For a secondary suburban principal, being with people who share an understanding of the work and face similar challenges is both reassuring and constructive. Elementary principals had sometimes learned more from their PD peers (than presenters): “Colleagues shared solutions [unfamiliar to me]” and “It helps to talk through situations you’re dealing with and getting different perspectives.” Spending time with principals who understand what you do and hope to accomplish was a common sentiment. This finding resonates with research on gains from principal PD involvement (Coenen et al., 2021; Lazenby et al., 2020; Levin et al., 2021).

Principals identified benefits to networking; however, finding time within their demanding schedules to fully engage in collaborative opportunities proved challenging.
Time and Relevancy Were the Greatest Constraints on Principals’ PD Involvement (Finding 8)

Time constraints disrupted principals’ PD participation, as confirmed by studies of principal PD (e.g., Darling-Hammond et al., 2022; Levin et al., 2021). All principals and two principal supervisors explained that principals want to attend PD sessions specific to their role, with time for reflection. The principals said they sometimes feel overwhelmed with all the initiatives on their campus, so when away from it, their time should be spent wisely: “I want to leave knowing my time was valued and I’m a better leader because of it or my students or teachers [gained somehow], but I don’t think many PD sessions are truly geared towards principals” (a secondary principal). As recounted by three principals, their PD sessions could have been more relevant to the principaship, and four principals felt overwhelmed by the sheer volume of offerings. Some struggled to connect what they had learned and their daily practice of instructional leadership.

State and local education agencies do not consistently distinguish PD that is specific to principals’ needs and interests (Steinberg & Yang, 2020). Principals are pulled in different directions throughout the day, so attention should be paid to the types of support and training they need for curriculum and instructional tasks (Lavigne et al., 2016).

Understanding that time and relevancy were issues for principal PD designed to develop instructional leadership, principal supervisors were strategic in the offerings made available.

Principal Supervisors Determined PD Opportunities for Principals Using Multiple Sources (Finding 9)

Needs assessments, division initiatives, state policies (e.g., VDOE [2022] performance standards for principals), and evidence-based practices were used by the principal supervisors in their consideration of principal PD opportunities. While needs assessments identified topics for PD, they had to reconcile what principals wanted with division priorities and state requirements. In their evaluation of principals’ use of PD offerings, supervisors determined principal needs and how best to address them in future PD. Statements made by two supervisors were: “I was seeing inconsistencies with the feedback principals were giving teachers during planning meetings, so had specialists in our PD department address strategies at a principal meeting that support professional learning communities”, and “We had to adjust our PD plans to ensure our PD covered the Science of Reading [approach to early literacy in the state] since schools are required to implement the Virginia Literacy Act.” In 2022, the General Assembly passed this legislation, which sets expectations for divisions and allocates resources for PD and instruction.1

Conclusions and Implications

All participants thought principal PD was vital to the instructional leadership role of today’s building leader and improving student outcomes. Networking, personalisation, and principal specific sessions were priorities for the principals and supervisors alike. While in-person PD was the most common form of participation for the principals, virtual and hybrid PD opportunities offered flexibility in scheduling, greater access, and cost savings. However, they struggled with finding time to fully engage in PD and relevancy, so they wanted their division to help with this.

Regarding implications, PD for the building leader must be principal-specific, focus on instructional leadership, and ensure networking opportunities. Various formats are advised for providing flexible and ongoing learning activities. Principal supervisors who make a difference in the effectiveness of principal PD schedule unencumbered time for learning and role applicable options. Through PD specifically designed for the principal, they offer choice and differentiation, handle access and funding issues, and offer follow-up coaching. In partnership with principals, they monitor the impact of PD so that anticipated influences on classrooms can be realised.

Further research on principal PD can take different directions. Considering nontraditional and nontechnical ways of seeing PD, English and Ehrich (2016) called for an aesthetics of educational leadership that we think could be usefully applied beyond university preparation to principal PD. While our explanation is simplistic, the idea is to transform how PD is conceived to awaken the notion that principals who lead beautifully are not just cultivating (or managing) teachers to help students learn the content for doing well in a standards-driven curriculum. Similarly, principal-specific PD that evidences leading beautifully would not shackle leader effectiveness to student performance and teacher readiness for achieving learning results. As such, we encourage PD and studies that reflect the internal world of leaders, not just their external world and understanding of it. An aesthetics of PD for principals that promotes expanded consciousness would emphasise “how leaders develop [a] discerning eye, … explicit and tacit knowledge [for gaining] extraordinary insights and competence as a leader, … and leadership identity” that dynamically unfolds in relation to others (English & Ehrich, pp. 58–59).

Considering the effects of PD programs, a question deserving more attention involves what instructional leadership practices (assessing classroom instruction, giving teachers feedback, etc.) principals spend time on that align with the PD they completed (Herrmann et al., 2019). The impact of PD on student learning can be narrowly studied by collecting pertinent data before and after sessions. Preparing principals to understand what essentials from PD to apply in their schools and how is also worthy of analysis (Irby et al., 2022). Other investigations can account for differences among methods (in-person, virtual, and hybrid) relative to their influence on principals’ instructional leadership skills, strategies, and implementations. PD studies that inquire into coaching for novice principals are also advisable. The extent to which PD resources are distributed equitably among schools and the effect on principals’ capacity as instructional leaders is yet another path for research. Importantly, district PD for principals who are from minoritised groups (women, people of colour, etc.) or in schools with high concentrations of underserved students in distressed localities is ripe for further study (Tran et al., 2023). Of note, little is
currently known about principal supervisors’ proficiency in instructional leadership and management, and their division-sponsored training and preparation for supervising principals.

Finally, we encourage more research on professional learning for leaders from the field of practice. Moving forward, rigorous analysis of PD pertaining to the school principal and principal supervisor is essential. The powerful influence of context on principals’ and supervisors’ understanding and practice of leadership also needs close attention in future studies. Educational leadership researchers and practitioners alike share responsibility for reimagining principals’ preparation and cultivation beyond efficiency mindsets and bureaucratic mandates. Perhaps our depiction of principal PD may encourage reflections on experience and enable readers to develop new understandings about problems of leadership practice. Given the complexity of school leadership, the efficacy of principals’ PD and learning is a vital consideration. We are keen for principals to lead with their whole self.

Authors’ Note

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References


In Support of Advocacy-Focused Legal Literacy Skills for School Leaders

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ABSTRACT: Empirical research has established the importance of legal training for educational leaders. Less empirical research has been devoted directly toward instructional practices, though recent findings (Gilbert, 2017; Hughes, 2023; Schneider, 2020) support the importance of a real-life focus and other contextually relevant considerations. This article has two focuses. First, it disseminates ranking information concerning challenges administrators face now and expect to encounter in the future. Further, it presents ranking outcomes identifying the specific legal literacy skills school leaders deem most essential. This initial information informs the second focus, supporting further development of legal process or problem-solving abilities originally targeted by Bull and McCarthy (1995). The importance of this focus has been further heightened by escalating legal challenges (Redfield, 2003) and increased calls for school leaders to advocate and act as champions for social change (McCarthy, 2016; McKenzie et al., 2008).

Key words: Advocacy, transformational leadership, empathy, legal literacy, conflict resolution administrator training

Introduction

America’s legal foundations have served its citizens well for over two centuries. As essential and enduring as the country’s system of laws has been, culture wars and escalating politically motivated provocations have prompted increasing unrest, advancing mistrust of the government’s judicial branch (Jones, 2022). Considering the scope of challenges and change that continues to build, guiding others through today’s growing complexities is only becoming more demanding and more personal for educational leaders (Fullan & Kirtman, 2019; Gilbert, 2017; Hughes, 2014, 2019; Miller, 2018). The expanding list of issues seems to be advancing almost unchecked as of late, keeping school leaders at the front lines of complex social issues that call for them to advocate for students, teachers, families, and education in general.

In a nation of laws that has long promoted its human rights authority, initiatives like improving diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are consistent targets of efforts to remove their
mere mention from the vocabularies of educators. Administrators frequently face complaints and confrontations from frustrated constituents on all sides of issues. For instance, during the pandemic, an Arizona elementary principal was accosted in her school’s office by parents objecting to the district’s COVID-specific field trip policies (Donnelly, 2022). Though situations like those may be rare, there are also numerous more typical challenges. For example, Zirkel (2015) described special education leadership as incredibly challenging since it is both the most highly legalised segment of education and arguably also the most contentious.

Anticipation of evolving complexities is warranted, as is the potential for increasing stakeholder challenges to leadership or long-established legal norms. In this light, legal preparation that incorporates sensemaking and advocacy skills (Hughes, 2023) could benefit administrators’ efforts to engage with their constituents during troubling times. Instead, unfortunately, many authors have recognised and criticised how today’s widely favoured standards-driven training priorities are heavily invested in the past (Decker & Brady, 2016; Decker et al., 2019; Decker & Pazey, 2017; English & Ehrich, 2016; Fullan & Kirtman, 2019).

To date, professional literature includes empirical research, most notably verifying the importance of legal training (Decker et al., 2019; Militello et al., 2009). In large part, that preparation aligns closely with long-standing training practices. That said, during the past decade alone, American society has visibly encountered dynamic and complex attitudinal shifts that likely have not been experienced since the counterculture movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Even ahead of more recent instability, there were sufficient grounds for expanding research targeting instructional approaches that directly address legal processing (Bull & McCarthy, 1995). Current stressors further justify administrators’ orientation to the sensemaking aspects of legal literacy (Hughes, 2023), which represents a way to interpret and navigate the changing contexts leaders should expect to face.

With an opportunity to inform future training practices, this article details research findings focused on the types of legal challenges administrators should be equipped to face. These are joined by insights into the top-ranked legal literacy skills that administrators prioritised. Further, the article advances an argument for further elevating the “legal process” emphasis on advocacy-focused skills within preparatory legal literacy training. Having served first as an administrator and, more recently, as a university-level trainer, it is clear that nurturing the ability to process challenges from an advocacy position is crucial to developing legally capable leaders.

**Literature Review**

**Legal Literacy Development**

Almost 30 years ago, the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA) called on Bull and McCarthy (1995) to elevate the dialogue concerning legal literacy and the legal preparation of school leaders. Their article described the legal realities school leaders faced as compliance-inspiring. They further specified how “the law is seen as prescriptive, placing limits on professional autonomy rather than creating a framework for expressing public values and decisions” (Bull & McCarthy, 1995, p. 615). In response, the authors envisioned the potential benefits of an eventual shift from administrator compliance toward increased agency
In Support of Advocacy-Focused Legal Literacy Skills for School Leaders

and engagement, which they termed legal process. Change is not known to be nimble across education, and it is fair to say that Bull and McCarthy’s vision for process-oriented leadership has not been widely emphasised within the literature. The limited exploration and development of this legal process topic is unfortunate as it underserves school leaders who find themselves in direct contact with students, staff, or community members involved with legally challenging issues.

We would do well to assist administrators in refining their adaptive skills and afford them the agency they need to serve as sense makers (Hughes, 2023) and, ultimately, advocates. School leadership is a complicated vocation, with a role that has increasingly become focused on managing situations between people while implementing someone else’s vision. Accredited leadership programs have traditionally looked to national training standards for guidance in developing essential instructional targets. Although legal training parameters were lightly addressed in preceding versions of the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISSLC) standards, National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA, 2015) forwarded a more robust series of priorities that included expanded attention to legal literacy benchmarks. As articulated in Standard Six, administrators have since been expected to know the law, policy, rights, and regulations. Further, preparatory programs are encouraged to teach future leaders how to analyse, monitor, and effectively communicate with others about education law and policy (NPBEA, 2015).

Supporters of administrator training standards appreciate their uniformity and their use in evaluating program development and delivery. However, these standards have critics. Many authors have voiced their concerns, arguing that the standards do not offer sufficient guidance (Davis et al., 2013; Decker, 2014; English & Ehrich, 2016; Ylimaki, 2014). Moreover, English and Ehrich (2016) contended that rigidly standardised approaches to leadership development based on outdated information can lead to undesirable stagnation when innovation is urgently needed.

Mihalic et al. (2004) noted that educational practices had already become fidelity-based 20 years ago. Larsen (2023) more recently provided evidence that a fidelity focus can increase dissonance and promote complacency for administrators. Said disconnects could limit administrator investment and jeopardise their abilities to motivate their staff. Outcomes like these are less than ideal for promoting internal growth. Instead of relying solely on standards established almost a decade ago and ensuing fidelity-focused practices, the demand for transformational learning (Cunningham et al., 2019) underscores the importance of ongoing research that is forward-looking and adaptable to future needs.

Updated Training

Training programs entrusted with administrator development must prepare tomorrow’s leaders to deal with increasing uncertainty and expanding complexities that we struggle to envision today (Fullan & Kirtman, 2019; Gilbert, 2017; Hughes, 2014, 2019; Miller, 2018; Young, 2015). Fledgling administrators’ legal preparation challenges are likely more significant than previously imagined, as their professional experiences and insights are typically limited to instructional duties they address within their classrooms (Schneider, 2020). Limited involvement
with policy issues, let alone confidential matters, leaves most aspiring leaders with minimal practical insight and negligible legal awareness to draw from (Schneider, 2020). Deficits like these reinforce the need for comprehensive training focuses and reinforce the call for empirical research devoted to legal literacy development for administrators (Decker, 2014; Decker & Brady, 2016; Decker et al., 2019; Decker & Pazey, 2017; Militello et al., 2009; Schneider, 2020; Tie, 2014).

**Empirical Research**

Militello et al. (2009) made a substantial contribution to the literature by empirically emphasising the importance of effective training by documenting deficits in administrators’ understanding of legal concepts. Their work was completed in conjunction with the National Association of Secondary School Principals. This study involved administrators completing a legal assessment, resulting in 85% of the participants recognising lapses in knowledge, leading them to question their future leadership behaviours. Their results concluded that school leaders would be more proficient in legally challenging situations provided they could complete a comprehensive school law class and had ongoing access to professional development and legal professionals.

Almost a decade later, Gilbert (2017) utilised a modified copy of the *Principals Education Law Survey* (Militello et al., 2009) on a much smaller scale than the original study. The chief conclusion from this research was that real-life approaches capable of adding extra context, richness, and complexity contributed to learning opportunities that were very favourable compared to more traditional learning models. Those perspectives were well aligned with discussion across the literature that highlighted the importance of context (Decker et al., 2019; Decker & Pazey, 2017; Pauken, 2012; Schneider, 2020).

Decker et al. (2019) also built upon the earlier work of Militello et al. (2009). Rather than examining legal competence, their study investigated the confidence and comfort levels generated through legal preparation. Instead of a national sample, this study focused on the attitudes of program graduates enrolled in the local legal preparation course between 2008 and 2015. According to this research, 85% of the respondents reported that the legal class changed their outlook and modified their potential approaches to leading through legal situations. These data provided evidence that preparatory legal training can inspire greater confidence in school leaders.

The importance of legal training has continued as a focus. Although empirical data were not provided to support additional insights, Decker and Pazey (2017) further detailed the importance of special education preparedness for teachers and administrators. This value was later reinforced by Casale et al. (2021) and Casale et al. (2024). Further, multiple authors (Decker et al., 2019; Decker & Pazey, 2017; Pauken, 2012; Schneider, 2020) have continued to emphasise the benefits of integrating context into instruction by incorporating real-life scenarios and perspectives. Schneider (2020) collected data from 10 students and 10 faculty interviews and concluded that student learning was well served when it involved legal content through readings and reality-based activities.
Most recently, Hughes (2023) collaborated with a state-wide school administrators’ association to survey educational leaders about their legal training priorities. Reported findings revealed overwhelming support (76%) for a core emphasis on real-life situations instead of a primary emphasis on legal content. It was also shared that most respondents (90%) did not receive the type of training they recommended, with the majority revealing that their preparation primarily focused on case outcomes and related legal products. These findings elevated the importance of incorporating reality-based activities in legal training. They also fuelled a recommendation to employ problem-based learning approaches (Bridges & Hallinger, 1995; Hallinger & Bridges, 2017) and to consider incorporating more of a sensemaking perspective (Ancona, 2012) and problem-solving approach within legal literacy development as a whole (Hughes, 2023).

**Ramifications**

The call to expand legal literacy’s footprint and emphasise further legal process (Bull & McCarthy, 1995) comes at a time when administrator preparation practices have been criticised in general (Boyland et al., 2015; Grissom et al., 2019; Hallinger & Bridges, 2017; Perrone & Tucker, 2019). The call is further fuelled by educational leaders’ encounters with escalating conflict replete with expanding complexity (Fullan & Kirtman, 2019; Gilbert, 2017; Hughes, 2014, 2019; Miller, 2018). According to Redfield (2003), conflict and ensuing school litigation have increased dramatically since No Child Left Behind was implemented. Current events, including the politicisation of school board elections, complaints about past COVID responses, and frequent reports of efforts to eliminate DEI, would suggest continued escalation even beyond Redfield’s initial assessment.

Multiple authors have referenced the negative ramifications of schools lacking effective front-line leadership for legally challenging situations (Bull & McCarthy, 1995; Decker et al., 2019; Militello et al., 2009; Schneider, 2020). O’Malley and Capper (2015) believed preparatory administrator training does not focus enough on equity concerns. Similarly, McCarthy (2016) emphasised the need for administrators to become more invested in advocacy. Reason would hold that changing conditions and expectations provide a powerful impetus for exploring updates to legal literacy preparation. In response, Hughes (2023) advanced the importance of preparing leaders to employ a sensemaking approach (Ancona, 2012) to navigate and lead others through the “discrepancy, ambiguity, and uncertainty” educators face regularly (Spillane & Lee, 2014, p. 437).

**Framework**

Existing scholarship has documented how essential legal training is for aspiring school administrators (Decker et al., 2019; Militello et al., 2009). This confirmation complements the priorities disseminated by national standards (NPBEA, 2015). Multiple authors have acknowledged the ongoing challenges school leaders face within a backdrop of constantly changing dynamics (Decker et al., 2019; Decker & Pazey, 2017; Schneider, 2020). This has
helped motivate a more sustained focus on instructional design to support their evolving leadership roles. Beyond research findings from Gilbert (2017), Schneider (2020), and Hughes (2023), trainers need additional empirically supported guidance for designing and delivering up-to-date legal literacy instruction.

Empirical data disseminated through this article were originally sought to support future legal training. Recognition of school leaders’ frontline responsibilities inspired a study that secured administrator insights surrounding challenging issues they face and anticipate encountering in an even more complex future (Fullan & Kirtman, 2019; Gilbert, 2017; Hughes, 2014, 2019, 2023; Miller, 2018). The knowledge gained about potential standout legal issues has immediate value for research, instruction, and professional development. This grounded feedback directly applies to evaluating administrators’ skills to navigate effectively during legally challenging situations (Orfield & Frankenberger, 2014). The legal literacy subskills rated within this study and the motivations behind the rankings stand to contribute to immediate and future research and preparation efforts (Young, 2015).

The literature underscores the preeminent position that legal content or “products” (Bull & McCarthy, 1995) hold relative to legal literacy training. However, the increasing references to “context” within the literature (Decker et al., 2019; Decker & Pazey, 2017; Pauken, 2012; Schneider, 2020), in combination with increasing conflict (Redfield, 2003), has highlighted the need for school leaders to become more involved in processing legal situations proactively. This involvement has been described as a unique “sensemaking ability” among school leaders (Hughes, 2023). According to Ancona (2012, p. 3), sensemaking is “a key leadership capability for the complex and dynamic world we live in today”. It involves “how we structure the unknown to be able to act in it”.

Supported, that ability can contribute to a leader’s sense of agency, enhancing their adaptability and nurturing their advocacy potential. Of note, within the literature, the term advocacy is frequently referenced broadly and is regularly associated with championing causes such as social justice issues (McCarthy, 2016; McKenzie et al., 2008). In retrospect, advocacy might also be tied to special education or other concerns school leaders are drawn into. These interactions could take place on any scale, including offering organisational or individual support. As intended in this article, advocacy embraces that entire range of efforts to champion a cause, but also reflects a proactive departure from the prevailing status quo that Bull and McCarthy (1995) spoke to concerning legal process.

In concert with Bull and McCarthy’s vision linked to more active legal activity on the part of school administrators, this research was invested in acknowledging the importance of administrators’ sensemaking duties. More specifically, it endeavoured to help further refine training focuses that could enhance sensemaking and advocacy-targeted legal literacy abilities within school leaders. This article reports on outcomes from the following three research questions:

1. Which issues do administrators perceive as presenting the greatest current legal challenge for school administrators?
2. Which issues do administrators perceive as presenting the greatest future legal challenge for school administrators?
3. Which skills are most important for building-level administrators?

Methods

Research regarding administrator legal literacy training has primarily provided empirical evidence that supports the value of preparation. Aside from Gilbert (2017), Schneider (2020), and Hughes (2023), there has been sparse empirical investigation addressing the specifics of improved instruction. Consistent with Militello et al. (2009) and Decker et al. (2019), this research also pursued a descriptive path. This decision was due to the lack of data-based literature to justify using inferential methods. When justified, inferential methods are popular. According to McLean and Ernest (1997, p. 3), however, the approach “provides no information about the meaningfulness” of the findings. Both Creswell (2009) and Fowler (2014) relayed that the type of structured survey utilised in this study enhances the meaning of the research.

The purpose of this research was to contribute empirical evidence in support of the ongoing refinement of legal literacy development for educational leaders. The primary focuses included identifying top legal challenges both now and in the future, as well as collecting insights concerning the most highly utilised and valued legal literacy skills. Data were collected through an IRB-approved survey featuring response options identified from the literature and then refined by extensive piloting both in-state and out-of-state. Survey development also incorporated consultation with an expert panel of former administrators holding faculty positions.

Instrumentation

This study employed a structured survey and utilised ranking scales to force respondents to prioritise their responses instead of routinely validating the importance of every option available to them. According to Qualtrics (2021), ranking scales are especially useful for forcing respondents to prioritise the importance of real-world items rather than relying on familiar Likert rating scales that could enable participants to be less discriminating in their selections and, subsequently, potentially more satisficing. As an exploratory exercise drawing from administrators who face many challenges and frequently view them with importance, rankings provided a valuable option for data collection. Results were tabulated using the Alchemer online survey software which computed the weighted value of each entry for each question.

Sample

Responses were provided by 193 active Arizona School Administrators Association (ASA) members. The association publicised the study through the monthly newsletter and forwarded the survey link with supporting information through its internal mailing list. Members were contacted directly only once but were collectively provided weekly reminders by ASA during the
six-week survey window. The survey generated responses from 193 of the 1078 possible members, resulting in a response rate of 18%. This outcome was a higher percentage by response than Militello et al. (2009), a national study that generated more participants. The response rate was lower than that reported by Decker et al. (2019), who devoted six months to their data collection compared to the window employed by this study, which generated more overall participants.

The ASA has members from every administrative classification, which allows for a robust response from members of multiple administrative ranks. As shown in Table 1, responses for this study were evenly distributed between Superintendents (29%), District-Level Non-Superintendents (28%), and Building-Level Administrators (36%). Also, as reported in Table 1, the responding sample was consistently distributed across other variables. Approximately 46% of participants were from either rural or remote settings, whereas almost 48% were urban or suburban. Though the middle level of experience (11–15 years) was lower at 15%, overall, each experience level was close to the 20% level. Finally, 38% were trained during the past 10 years, whereas 33% finished their legal aspects training during the previous 11–20 years.

**TABLE 1**

Sample Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Variable (Years)</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Current Assignment</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Experience N=192</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Superintendent</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>28.5</td>
<td>0-5</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>20.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assistant Superintendent</td>
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<td>27.5</td>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>23.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>HS Level</td>
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<td>11-15</td>
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<tr>
<td>MS Level</td>
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<td>3.6</td>
<td>16-20</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>19.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elem Level</td>
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<td>21 Plus</td>
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<td>21.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work Setting</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Time Since Classes N=192</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>0-5</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>12.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>32.6</td>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>25.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>45.1</td>
<td>11-15</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>15.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remote</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>16-20</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>17.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>21 Plus</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>24.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Results**

The information generated by this study is not complex. It was an exploratory effort seeking to contribute novel, useful training information while concurrently creating an opening for potential dialogue and possible follow-up investigation. Of note, the analysis revealed no
standout variations between the responses of group members described earlier. Representing the training views of many, one participant offered the following conclusion: “I think that the focus should be on the day-to-day things you deal with as an administrator instead of just the ‘big’ issues.” This pragmatic point of view exemplifies the attitudes many shared through their rankings and words. Additional descriptions are shared next under the headings of: Current Challenges, Future Issues, and Skillset.

**Current Challenges**

It is openly opined that legal studies are the most critical competency area and topic of study for school leaders. The specific areas of challenge prioritised by participants were rated against each other from a list initially narrowed down through multiple piloting efforts. As represented in Table 2, special education claimed the top overall ranking across all possible selections. That response was not unexpected based on references across the literature, nor was it a surprise for personnel to follow behind due in part to the frequency of issues, perhaps, but also because of the extensive contractual and policy specificity in place. As a reminder, every item was essential enough to remain out of the 12 original topics reviewed during survey construction. Therein, the remaining options that received lower responses are still significant focuses.

In addition to rankings, participants provided commentary that had some bearing on current issues. Some comments addressed ranked items; others offered insights into potential issues that may deserve additional attention. Special education was called out directly through repeated comments calling for a separate course on special education law. Multiple comments addressed the need to cover specific topics involving real-life situations. Student issues and personnel issues were listed as relevant topics in those statements. Other commentary introduced the possible benefits of specialising instruction for K–8 instead of High School professionals, with another calling for differentiation between rural and urban settings. One comment summarised many other comments and the importance of this topic by offering instruction focusing on “current challenges administrators can expect to face and how to address these challenges while considering legal ramifications”.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 2</th>
</tr>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Current Challenges Rankings Scores</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Number of Rankings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Special Education Issues</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>753</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personnel Issues/Teacher Rights</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>596</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Safety/Well-being</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>595</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Justice/Equity Issues</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>439</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Rights</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>418</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Future Challenges

The ranking of future concerns was carried out in the same manner as current issues. A dozen possible issues were drawn from repeated references across the literature and narrowed down to the top five options represented in Table 3. The two top-ranked options were directly linked to emerging technology-related threats. Cultural conflict includes culture war efforts to limit and even reverse social justice gains and is closely aligned with minority rights. This response placement represents a “middle” position similar to the social justice rating for current issues. Privatisation and the spread of charter schools earned the lowest score in either Table 2 or Table 3, but it still qualified as an option on the survey. It was an understandably important topic for administrators in Arizona, where competition with charter schools has only been growing year after year. In addition to group-wide rankings, individual commentary reinforced technology and gender identity issues as emerging concerns. Broader nationwide issues were considered potential indicators of future local challenges in less populated areas.

### TABLE 3

**Future Challenges Ranking Scores**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Number of Rankings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social Media Intrusion</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>734</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tech Security/Privacy Issues</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>636</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Conflict</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>526</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minority Rights and Services</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>509</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Privatisation/Charters</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>378</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Skillset**

The skills administrators develop through legal training should support their actions during professional challenges. For this prompt, participants were again presented with a ranking exercise with options narrowed down through repeated piloting activities. Table 4 presents a considerable range of scores from first to fifth place. The response for the top-place option received the highest score on any of the three questions, and the counterpart at the bottom received the lowest.

The outcomes for this prompt were telling. The legal product options of legal history and policy found their way to the final survey following piloting but did not score in the top half of all the response options. Instead, the ability to deal with people during legal and advocacy situations stood out, as the top three ranked options were aligned with that construct. This outcome arguably underscores the people-centred sensemaking role administrators hold. In a courtroom, legal doctrine is the prevailing currency for decision making. At the same time, the school leaders’ domain calls on them to relate, advocate, build trust, and work through disputes.
that could be brought forward or involve them directly. Knowledge of legal content is necessary, though legal process-type skills were deemed more vital in this ranking.

In addition to response patterns reflected by reported data, specific statements addressed the importance of skill development beyond merely improving knowledge of legal content. As one participant wrote: “My class was about law as it related to the shaping of education today. It was not a guide or practical use class. It was informative but not necessarily useful for the position.” Several other statements confirmed that learning to handle challenges and address situations is essential. Rehearsal of practical skills was suggested in one instance. Without naming a specific skill in their statement, one participant reinforced the importance of legal process when indicating, “There is a pattern to figuring these things out”.

**TABLE 4**

**Skillset Ranking Scores**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Number of Rankings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conflict Resolution</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>779</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capacity Building In Others</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>652</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy/Engendering Trust</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>634</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal History/Case Analysis</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>438</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>281</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Discussion**

The research focus and specific questions referenced in this article were framed from a practitioner’s perspective. Notably, the findings from the three questions align with the literature in slightly different ways. Context is now regularly referenced within the literature. The first two research questions concerning current and future issues were more directly related to context. The challenges were offered in a topical nature, the way a practitioner would encounter them and likely consider them professionally. In contrast, legal history tends to be referenced in a case-specific fashion. Legal aspects courses, textbooks, and professional development opportunities are more likely to frame events according to case history.

The third research question was concerned with legal literacy skills. It relates well to *legal process*, which Bull and McCarthy (1995) represented as a more actively involved approach to navigating and impacting the outcomes of local legal issues. That concept, which implies utilising interpersonal skills, is not commonly referenced in the literature. However, it aligns well with the sensemaking construct described by Ancona (2012) and referenced by Hughes (2023). As applied in this article, that construct also aligns well with advocacy-oriented leadership practices. Although this article does not report extensive skills rankings data, the findings are telling and attest to administrators’ apparent readiness to move beyond the legal compliance mentality originally described by Bull and McCarthy (1995).
Interpretation

While the study was not designed to determine statistical significance, worthwhile insights were generated and are offered here. The choices with the greatest legal structure and most specific rules (Special Education and Personnel) presented the most significant concerns for current challenges. In contrast, the areas offering the greatest ambiguity (Technology) were rated as posing the most significant future challenge. Perspective and context matter, and the unknown may be more concerning until reality catches up and the rules are better understood.

While top ratings usually garner the most attention, this study also generated noteworthy middle-level results. The current and future challenges found equity issues (Social Justice and Cultural Conflict or Minority Rights) in the middle of the rankings. Currently referenced as DEI initiatives, these issues are primary concerns in higher education circles where administrator leadership training is conceived and delivered (Capper, 2015; McKenzie et al., 2008). While equity issues did not reach the top of the rankings, they maintained a strong presence in current and future ratings. This continued presence in the minds of school leaders bodes well for interests expressed by McCarthy (2016) and others who contend administrators could be better champions of equity issues and marginalised students.

Instructional Value

Case histories offer tremendous content value throughout legal training. That said, organising instruction according to legal history potentially isolates large amounts of surrounding context. In contrast, addressing impactful real-life challenges within a problem-based learning format (Hughes, 2023) provides a more authentic introduction to instruction while also offering tangible insights into commingling variables. Framing training around challenges, whether current or future, provides aspiring leaders with a broader and more tangible understanding of their role and the potential impacts of their actions.

For example, there is a unique context to assess and contend with while addressing special education, which has layers of rules and history to be concerned with, in contrast to sizing up social media trouble spots. Social media is new and has zero accountability (Justice & Stanley, 2016), whereas that very term, accountability, is an overriding special education concern for administrators. Orienting legal instruction within a real-life construct stands to help aspiring leaders develop a more explicit grasp of the challenges they will be facing. The insights can also help them map out future working relationships and realise leadership expectations beyond starting out accepting there are repercussions for not following special education rules.

Social justice is complicated in its own right because the cause is riddled with paradoxes that present numerous equity challenges for school leaders (Gaetane, 2008). Immersing instruction within the actual construct stands to help students recognise that shifting battle lines are constantly being revisited and re-drawn at national, state, and local governing board levels. Case outcomes provide valuable information. That said, learning legal content within applicable contexts offers a vantage point that educators can recognise and already relate to, which stands to improve their understanding of their leadership expectations. It also explains why the skills ranked highest by participants are so crucial to develop.
The skills rankings from research question three revealed unmistakable support for addressing processing skills (Conflict Resolution, Capacity Building, Empathy) in legal training. Notably, administrators ranked conflict resolution at such a high level that it outscored both product-related options (Policy and Legal History) combined. That is not a statement of statistical significance, but it is compelling in a practical sense nonetheless. Minimally, these results strongly suggest that process-oriented people skills belong in the legal literacy conversation. Realistically, these skills should be nurtured during preparatory training for aspiring and novice leaders and professional development for everyone else.

The findings also support nurturing an advocacy orientation within administrators’ legal literacy development. That objective aligns well with a viewpoint expressed by Lewis and Kern (2018, p. 741), who advanced, “Legal literacy is more than a tool that can be used to avoid legal liability; it can be used as a proactive advocacy tool to promote social justice and LGBTQ inclusion.” Similarly, that very same proactive approach stands to lend itself to a multitude of issues administrators face continuously. With interpretations of the data presented completed, this article will focus on providing an argument for developing proactive advocacy-focused legal literacy skills and dispositions among school leaders.

Advocacy-Focused Legal Literacy Skills

Supporting advocacy-focused legal literacy skills for school leaders marks this article’s second, though primary, focal point. This offering embraces Bull and McCarthy’s (1995) vision of preparing school leaders to engage in “process” and act as advocates within their compliance-dominated field of educational law. Simply put, the society education is expected to excel within has become increasingly volatile. Public education itself has increasingly become a direct and unmitigable target of this discord (Fullan & Kirtman, 2019; Gilbert, 2017; Hughes, 2014, 2019; Miller, 2018; Young, 2015). Despite its well-conceived foundations and history of success, the legal system no longer appears fully trusted nor perhaps capable of defending the institution of public schools. This lingering area of doubt is, in effect, the supreme contextual consideration that school administrators cannot afford to overlook.

Almost 20 years ago, Theoharis (2008) informed us that social causes faced resistance above and beyond the barriers that had long existed and were considered the primary equity-inhibiting factor. In recent years, quickly closing in on a decade, resistance has visibly and publicly given way to mounting resentment and recrimination, along with efforts targeting reversal and retribution. That is not a research finding but a vivid characterisation of what is witnessed daily across America. That the current climate and the potential conditions will almost certainly worsen before they get better amounts to a clear call for transformational leadership (Cunningham et al., 2019). The development of those champions, catalysts, and model leaders has not been foretold or accounted for by history – legal or otherwise. Their appearance only comes from investment in the training and support leaders receive to influence their daily practice.
Administrators, particularly building leaders, are positioned on the front lines of family, social, and organisational issues. While attorneys and supervisory administrators come and go, principals never escape the daily barrage of questions, complaints, and challenges. They carry all of that past trauma, their current professional stress, and the weight of everyone else’s needs along with them every day. Referencing a policy or case outcome for an upset constituent is not enough. Principals, in particular, need the skills and the agency to carry out what they originally set out to do as leaders and be the ones who can make a difference. Bull and McCarthy (1995) envisioned a space for advocacy almost 30 years ago.

As a graduate faculty member, I have had multiple traditionally trained students with years of respected administrative experience admit that they have gotten very good at hiding behind the law as an excuse for avoiding action they knew they should have taken. It is not all that surprising to hear those types of admissions, but is professionally affirming that most have chosen to step out from behind that shadow upon sharing that insight. There is a reason McCarthy (2016) mentioned the need for investment, and the law class in reference incorporates proactive practice and, ultimately, advocacy as a central pillar for legal literacy and leadership in general.

**Implications**

**Practical**

The means for developing legal advocacy skills already exist. Ideally, legal training in graduate programs continues to explore the context and more intentionally moves toward preparing aspiring leaders for real-life situations. Hughes (2023) indicated that an overwhelming majority of administrator participants indicated support for preparation that was grounded in real-life situations they could expect to face, though only 10% reported having received that type of instruction. There are options for those whose past training belonged in that same 90% cohort or continue receiving traditional content-focused training. Professional development would be beneficial, provided it amounted to something more than the annual review of the year’s most pressing legal (content) cases. School leaders must acquire and hone legal processing skills they likely never developed in the classroom (Schneider, 2020). Further, they need to know that they are supported in their use.

The feasibility of advancing an advocacy focus as a pillar of legal literacy for school leaders also hinges on local practice. As a lead administrator, my most familiar source of disappointment was witnessing principals who repeatedly had the opportunity and ability to resolve any number of challenges but regularly chose to pass issues along to a higher authority instead. Undoubtedly, school leaders are confronted with a myriad of contentious issues, often without the necessary support. Shifting towards an advocacy approach represents a significant paradigm shift for all parties involved. As McCarthy (2016) rightly pointed out, without personal investment, nothing will change. If leaders do not feel a sense of agency and empowerment in their work, no significant improvement will occur either.
Preparatory Training

As is represented in this article, Hughes (2023) advanced that administrators stand to fulfil an essential legal sensemaking role that should and could be nurtured by their legal training. More specifically, it was offered that problem-based instruction models (Bridges & Hallinger, 1995; Hallinger & Bridges, 2017) aligned well with the instructional qualities strongly preferred by participating school administrators (Hughes, 2023). Further, PBL training approaches could afford aspiring leaders a critical proactive “pre-practice” understanding of their advocacy roles, responsibilities, and working relationships while concurrently introducing legal content and constructs.

Findings reported in this article clearly established that administrators valued proactive legal process skills ahead of legal content and products. Further, Hughes (2023) indicated that administrators overwhelmingly advocated for real-life training priorities and practices, though 90% indicated not receiving such preparation. Current legal training is driven by 10-year-old standards that primarily address knowledge of legal products (NPEA, 2015). This article’s emphasis on incorporating training space to nurture legal processing abilities (Bull & McCarthy, 1995) aligns well with potential advocacy activities better geared toward meeting future leadership needs (Young, 2015).

Research

Following Bull and McCarthy’s (1995) pronouncement on legal literacy, research has better established the importance of legal literacy than it has pursued the value of promoting legal processing roles and abilities. Though knowing about the legal system’s practices and court decisions is a necessary training component, does exposure to legal content provide school leaders with enough contextual insight and interactive leadership skills to sensibly and effectively lead others through legal challenges? If not, where else are they supposed to acquire it from?

The findings and conclusions disseminated in this article attempt to contribute to an improved understanding of that line of questioning. That said, the topic could benefit from continued investigation. To that end, pursuing a direct inquiry into how administrators perceive their legal leadership roles and needs now and in the future would be beneficial. Said efforts could reinforce our understanding of the obstacles and necessary supports that shape their legal reality. To this point, our best information confirms that legal training is necessary. We have some empirical knowledge of instructional preferences. As we look ahead to the future, anticipating increased turmoil for educational leaders, it would be fortuitous to continue exploring ways to introduce legal content alongside legal process elements of legal literacy.

Conclusion

Bull and McCarthy (1995) acknowledged the importance of legal products long ago while advancing the prospect of the legal process becoming an impactful legal literacy factor. The
literature seldom refers to their vision of the legal process. However, this research and the resulting article embrace their concept, and McCarthy’s (2016) subsequent reference to legal preparation imbuing school administrators with ownership and a spirit of advocacy. Due to the paucity of references to this aspect of their work, this article likely takes on a postmodern appearance while seeking to inject sensemaking skills and an advocacy calling into the well established dialogue surrounding legal literacy training.

As was referenced earlier on, this undertaking presented two focuses. The first part addressed the direct meaning of the data. The second part sought a pragmatist interpretation of ways the reported findings likely relate to administrators’ self-perceived legal leadership role. In the courtroom, an attorney is tasked with framing and delivering a compelling legal argument for their client. Their understanding of legal products tremendously impacts their potential for success. However, their potential to persevere also relies on their understanding of legal process. This includes knowing how to assess the courtroom and effectively address a variety of demanding interactions both with adversaries and supporters.

Thankfully, school administrators are not expected to navigate in a courtroom setting. They know full well that is what they have attorneys for. However, they invariably and, in fact, perpetually function in the court of public opinion and local agency governance. They are fortunate to have direction from their attorney to supplement their past legal preparation and resulting knowledge of legal content. In most instances, however, an attorney’s responsibility to read and navigate their courtroom setting falls completely on administrators’ shoulders in their local realities involving parents, teachers, and the public at large. Unfortunately, the literature on training largely neglects to reference educational leaders’ preparation for this responsibility or the importance of identifying advocacy and sensemaking skills as critical legal literacy focuses.

The pragmatist interpretation of this article’s findings and the comparison offered would likely assert that administrators recognise their advocacy and sensemaking duties. They would have little other reason to rank legal literacy skills so far ahead of content knowledge if they did not internalise the importance of their legal processing role and recognise the value of those abilities. Assuming this interpretation is sound, it is feasible to assert further that, at least to some extent, school leaders embrace the importance of sensemaking and their advocacy roles. Finally, considering the current state of the training literature and the rationale represented here, it could be inferred that increased attention to developing legal processing abilities would stand to improve legal literacy skills and administrators’ chances for future success.

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Transformative Perspectives: A Phenomenological Study of Doctoral Students Implementing Universal Design for Learning in Educational Leadership

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ABSTRACT: The phenomenological study explored how doctoral students integrate and apply Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles, focusing on their personal and professional transformations. By examining their narratives and reflections, this research provides insight into the application of UDL concepts in educational leadership practices. Using in-depth interviews and personal reflections, the study identified three main themes: the personal adaptation of UDL principles; transformative perceptions of inclusivity; and the practical impact of UDL on educational environments. These themes revealed a transformative understanding of inclusivity and its critical role in leadership, contributing to the broader discourse on the effectiveness of UDL in educational leadership programs and its potential to foster more inclusive educational environments.

Key words: Universal Design for Learning (UDL), educational leadership, transformative learning, inclusivity, accessibility

Introduction

In recent years, the importance of inclusive and accessible learning environments has gained prominence in educational leadership, driven by global advocacies for diversity and equity (Ince, 2023; Lomellini et al., 2022; Nejati & Shafaei, 2023). Amidst these societal shifts, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) has emerged as a pivotal framework for addressing diverse learning needs, offering multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression to ensure that learning is accessible to all people (Center for Applied Special Technology, 2018; Meyer et
According to Meyer et al., UDL is based on the premise that educational environments and resources can be designed from the outset to accommodate diverse learner variability, thereby reducing the need for subsequent modifications or specialised accommodations. The increasing adoption of UDL highlights the growing demand for leaders skilled in fostering inclusive educational practices (Fovet, 2020; Hills et al., 2022; Rao et al., 2024).

This study was conducted within the context of a public university in Florida, specifically focusing on doctoral students enrolled in the Educational Leadership Ed.D. program within the university’s College of Education. The university offers a range of concentrations within this doctoral program, including K–12 Leadership, Higher Education Leadership, Curriculum & Instruction, Multicultural/Lingual, and Learning Design and Innovation. These programs are designed to prepare students for senior leadership roles by integrating practical leadership skills with advanced theoretical knowledge.

The six participants in this study were students in a required, core course in the program titled “Universal Design for Learning in Leadership”. Participants hold a variety of roles in educational settings within higher education and K–12, including director, coordinator, instructor, and teacher. The course was structured to explore the application of UDL principles within various leadership contexts. The course encouraged students to critically engage with UDL as a framework for enhancing educational accessibility and inclusivity. As part of their coursework, participants undertook several activities in a comprehensive project: conducting a needs analysis; developing a root-cause analysis and logic model; and crafting SMART goals along with a final presentation report. The project was aimed at addressing specific problems in their professional practice, utilising UDL principles to propose evidence-based solutions and strategies for systemic implementation.

The research engaged these doctoral students after the conclusion of their course, providing a reflective window into their experiences with UDL implementation. All participants voluntarily consented to partake in this study, with the assurance that all data would be collected and analysed post-course to avoid any potential conflicts of interest or bias in course outcomes. This setting not only offered a rich exploratory ground for examining the practical applications of UDL in educational leadership but also aligned with the phenomenological approach of the study by focusing on the perspectives of these emerging educational leaders as they integrated UDL principles into their practice.

This phenomenological study explored how doctoral students in an educational leadership program experienced the application of UDL principles to overcome specific educational barriers and enhance learning outcomes. By examining the nature and significance of these experiences, the study sought to understand the processes, challenges, and transformative impacts of implementing UDL within the participants’ professional practices (Rao & Meo, 2016). Employing Mezirow’s (1991) theory of transformative learning, the research investigated how these experiences contributed to the students’ development as leaders capable of navigating and advocating for inclusive educational practices (Carter & Nicolaides, 2023; Kokkos, 2022).
The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of doctoral students in an educational leadership program as they apply the UDL framework to their professional practice?
2. How do doctoral students describe the challenges and successes they encounter while integrating UDL principles into their leadership and organisational practices?
3. In what ways do doctoral students perceive and make meaning of the UDL guidelines and checkpoints within the context of their professional practice and personal growth as leaders?

By highlighting the practical applications and challenges of implementing UDL in diverse educational contexts, the findings from this study aim to contribute to the broader discourse on the effectiveness of UDL in leadership preparation programs and its potential to foster more inclusive educational environments. The following section will describe the existing literature on UDL, transformative learning theory, and their intersection with educational leadership, providing a theoretical backdrop for understanding the study’s context and framing the subsequent analysis.

**Literature Review**

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is predicated on the principle that educational environments and resources should be accessible and effective for all people, regardless of their background or ability. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a research-based framework developed by the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST, 2018) to improve and optimise teaching and learning for all people based on scientific insights into how humans learn. UDL guides the design of instructional goals, assessments, methods, and materials that can be customised and adjusted to meet individual needs. The framework identifies three primary brain networks that play crucial roles in learning: recognition networks for the “what” of learning; strategic networks for the “how” of learning; and affective networks for the “why” of learning (CAST, 2018; Meyer et al., 2014). UDL’s guidelines recommend providing multiple means of representation to give learners various ways of acquiring information and knowledge, multiple means of action and expression to provide learners alternatives for demonstrating what they know, and multiple means of engagement to tap into learners’ interests, offer appropriate challenges, and increase motivation. This comprehensive approach aims to make learning accessible and effective for all, fostering resilience and a sense of autonomy among students.

UDL promotes inclusivity by offering diverse means of representation, expression, and engagement to accommodate individual learning differences (Meyer et al., 2014). As educational settings increasingly adopt UDL, they contribute to a more inclusive educational landscape where barriers to learning are proactively identified and mitigated (Novak & Rodriguez, 2016; Rao & Meo, 2016). Recent studies underscore UDL’s effectiveness in improving educational outcomes and enhancing learner engagement across a broad spectrum of student populations (Fovet, 2020; Hills et al., 2022; Syre-Hager, 2022). By integrating UDL principles, educational leaders can ensure that learning processes are flexible and adaptable, meeting the needs of the learner variability inherent in everyone (Meyer et al., 2014).
While UDL is widely promoted for its inclusivity, critics suggest it may not fully address the complexities of individual learner needs across diverse educational settings (Almeqdad et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2023). There are ongoing critiques of UDL for lacking clarity in definition, challenges with implementation, and insufficient evidence of its effectiveness (Zhang et al., 2024). Further evaluation of UDL is warranted. Despite these critiques, this study focuses specifically on the application of UDL within the context of required coursework in an educational leadership program, exploring its integration as a pedagogical tool designed to enhance inclusivity and accessibility in leadership training.

Transformative learning theory, developed by Mezirow (1991), emphasises that significant learning involves altering one’s frame of reference through critical reflection, leading to a profound shift in personal and professional perspectives. In the context of educational leadership, this theory has been instrumental in examining how leaders can facilitate environments that encourage reflective practices and foster change (Hoggan & Hoggan-Kloubert, 2022). Leaders who engage with transformative learning processes are better equipped to implement and advocate for inclusive educational practices, such as those advocated by UDL (Carter & Nicolaides, 2023; Kokkos, 2022; Syre-Hager, 2022).

The integration of UDL within educational leadership is not just about adopting a set of strategies for learning but is also about fostering a culture of inclusivity and transformation. UDL and transformative learning intersect where leaders utilise UDL not only as a pedagogical tool but also as a catalyst for organisational change. Leaders who embody transformative learning principles actively challenge existing norms and collaborate with stakeholders to ensure that educational practices are equitable and accessible (Lomellini et al., 2022; Nejati & Shafaei, 2023). This dual focus on UDL and transformative learning creates a framework for leaders to develop skills that are critical for navigating and dismantling barriers to learning and participation in diverse educational systems.

UDL provides a structured yet flexible framework for addressing diverse learning needs, while transformative learning theory offers a deep understanding of how personal and organisational changes can be realised through critical reflection and dialogue. Together, these concepts form this study’s foundation for exploring the transformative experiences of doctoral students in an educational leadership program who are infusing UDL principles into their own professional practice. The next section builds upon this foundation by specifically examining how Mezirow’s (1991) transformative learning theory not only informs but also enhances the implementation of UDL within educational leadership. This theoretical framework will further clarify how doctoral students’ perceptions and practices are influenced by their engagement with UDL, providing a context for understanding the phenomenological aspects of their experiences.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study’s theoretical underpinning is rooted in Mezirow’s theory of transformative learning, which posits that significant learning entails not only knowledge acquisition but also the transformation of one’s perspective through critical reflection (Mezirow, 1991). This framework offers a structure for understanding how educational leaders undergo transformative processes, leading to profound personal and organisational changes.
The integration of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) within educational leadership can be conceptualised as a transformative process. When leaders encounter the limitations of traditional educational models, they face disorienting dilemmas that challenge their existing assumptions about teaching and learning. This critical reflection is essential as it reveals potential misalignments between current practices and the inclusive ethos advocated by UDL. Through the transformative learning phases, leaders begin to adopt and implement strategies that align more closely with UDL principles, such as providing multiple means of representation, engagement, and action to meet diverse learner needs.

Research supports the idea that transformational leadership, derived from transformative learning theory, is instrumental in initiating and sustaining significant changes within educational settings (Hariharan & Anand, 2023; Ngara, 2022). Transformational leaders act as change agents, facilitating cultural shifts and promoting environments where innovative teaching strategies, such as those adhering to UDL guidelines, are embraced and implemented (Edyburn, 2021; Kareem et al., 2023). Furthermore, transformative leaders play a critical role in ensuring that organisational policies and resources support the systematic adoption of UDL, effectively addressing challenges like resistance to change or insufficient knowledge among staff (Craig et al., 2022; Kareem et al., 2023). They foster collaborative and professional development opportunities that enhance shared understanding and commitment to inclusivity principles across the institution (Edyburn, 2021).

By applying Mezirow’s (1991) transformative learning theory to the leadership of UDL implementation in educational organisations, this framework provides insight into the processes by which educational leaders foster and sustain change. This approach aligns with hermeneutic phenomenology’s emphasis on interpreting the meanings that participants ascribe to their experiences within their specific contexts, allowing the study to reveal deeper, participant-centred insights into the application of UDL (Van Manen, 2014). The methodology, therefore, balanced theoretical guidance with the responsiveness essential to phenomenological inquiry. This theoretical framework not only guides the study but also enriches the understanding of how UDL might be effectively integrated to foster more inclusive educational landscape.

Methodology

The study explored how doctoral students in an educational leadership program integrated and applied Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles, focusing on their personal and professional transformations. By examining their narratives and reflections, this research provided insight into the application of Universal Design for Learning concepts in educational leadership practices. The phenomenological method was used for understanding the transformative processes that enhance educational leadership through UDL. To ensure confidentiality and preserve the anonymity of participants, pseudonyms are used throughout this manuscript to represent each participant.
Research Design

This study employed a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, as articulated by Van Manen (2014), to explore the deeply subjective and contextual experiences of doctoral students in an educational leadership program. Hermeneutic phenomenology is particularly suited for this study as it emphasises the interpretation of the participants’ experiences within their specific contexts, which aligns with our goal of understanding the complex implementation of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles in educational leadership. This methodological choice is grounded in its ability to uncover rich, descriptive insights into how educational leaders interpret and enact transformative learning processes within their professional environments.

Participant Selection

Six doctoral students from an educational leadership program were selected to participate in this study. The criteria for selection included students who had successfully completed the core course, “Universal Design for Learning in Leadership”, and who were actively engaged in applying UDL principles in their professional practice as part of their coursework (Smith, 2015). This specific participant group was chosen to ensure that the study could explore rich, informed perspectives from individuals who are not only studying educational leadership but are also applying its principles in real contexts. The small number of participants is typical of phenomenological research, which prioritises depth over breadth in data collection (Van Manen, 2014).

Data Collection Methods

Data for this study were collected using semi-structured interviews and reflective journals, methods that Creswell and Poth (2017) endorse for their ability to elicit detailed and profound insights into participants’ personal stories about the phenomenon being studied. Interviews were conducted over a period of two months, each lasting approximately 60 minutes, allowing for an in-depth exploration of each participant’s experiences with Universal Design for Learning (UDL). All interviews were recorded with participants’ informed consent, ensuring ethical standards were maintained throughout the research process (Seidman, 2013). Additionally, participants’ written reflections, derived from their coursework, provided valuable insights into their thoughts and feelings as they navigated the application of UDL in their professional practices. These reflections were crucial as they offered a personal introspection into the participants’ transformative experiences, enriching the data’s depth and breadth (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Ortlipp, 2008). This combination of data collection methods ensured a comprehensive understanding of how UDL principles were internalised and applied, aligning with the phenomenological aim to capture the essence of their perceptions.
Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the university’s institutional review board. Prior to data collection, all participants were informed about the study’s purpose, the nature of their involvement, and their rights to confidentiality and withdrawal without consequence (American Psychological Association, 2017). Informed consent was obtained from each participant. All data were anonymised to protect participants’ identities and protect confidentiality.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted following Van Manen’s (2014) methodological framework for hermeneutic phenomenology, emphasising thematic analysis to identify and describe phenomena as experienced by the participants. Although the study was guided by Mezirow’s (1991) Transformative Learning Theory to explore how participants relate to Universal Design for Learning (UDL), the author maintained an openness to emergent themes that reflect the participants’ own perspectives. This blend ensures that while the theoretical framework directed the initial lines of inquiry, the analysis remained sensitive to new, unanticipated insights that arose during the interviews and reflective journaling process (Beck, 2021). This methodological flexibility is in line with the hermeneutic phenomenological approach that values the participants’ lived experiences and interpretations as they engage with UDL principles (Van Manen, 2014).

The data analysis process began with a detailed transcription of the interviews, adhering to the rigorous standards suggested by Creswell and Poth (2017), who recommend meticulous transcription to ensure accuracy and reliability in qualitative research. Following transcription, a line-by-line analysis was undertaken, highlighting significant statements that capture the essence of the participants’ experiences with UDL. These significant statements were then synthesised into themes reflecting the core aspects of UDL implementation within educational leadership contexts. This thematic analysis process, supported by Creswell and Poth’s guidelines, ensured that the data were interpreted comprehensively and systematically, aligning with the study’s theoretical framework of transformative learning and providing deep insights into the participants’ transformative experiences.

This study employed a phenomenological approach to explore the experiences of six doctoral students implementing UDL in educational leadership as part of their coursework at a public university in Florida. Participants were selected based on their active engagement with UDL in both coursework and professional settings. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews and personal reflections, conducted post-course to ensure unbiased reflections. Ethical standards were rigorously maintained, with all participants providing informed consent. Analysis followed Van Manen’s (2014) framework, focusing on thematic exploration to uncover deep insights into how participants perceive and integrate UDL principles into their leadership practices. This methodology was used to effectively capture the lived experiences and transformative processes of the participants.
Findings

This section presents the key findings from this phenomenological study exploring how doctoral students describe their experiences in educational leadership as they implemented Universal Design for Learning (UDL). The findings are organised around three major themes: the personal adaptation of UDL principles; transformative perceptions of inclusivity; and the practical impact of UDL on educational environments. Each theme was examined through the lens of transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1991); disorienting dilemmas, critical reflection, rational discourse, and action, as these are the stages that highlight the transformative learning experiences of the participants. These themes address the research questions concerning how participants applied UDL, the challenges they faced, their evolving perceptions of inclusivity, and the impact of their actions on educational environments.

Personal Adaptation of UDL Principles

This theme explores how participants dynamically adapted Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles within their professional settings, highlighting their journey through initial uncertainties to strategic adaptations.

Disorienting Dilemma

Participants grappled with initial uncertainties and resistance while integrating UDL, which often led to critical reevaluations of their approaches. Taylor shared the apprehension felt when introducing new methods, stating, “When I first started incorporating UDL, I wasn’t sure how my students would react, which caused me some anxiety”. Challenges also arose with collaborative projects as Taylor added, “I tried using group projects to enhance collaboration, but it backfired initially. Some students felt overwhelmed, which wasn’t my intention”. Similarly, Sabrina faced resistance from colleagues that spurred a reconsideration of her methods: “Initially, I encountered resistance from colleagues, which made me rethink how I present UDL principles”. She noted the ineffectiveness of initial efforts: “I thought adding multimedia resources was enough, but some students were distracted rather than engaged. It was a wakeup call”.

Critical Reflection

Reflecting on these initial challenges was pivotal. Katelyn discussed the importance of reassessing personal teaching assumptions: “I had to reflect on my own assumptions about teaching and realize that what worked for me didn’t necessarily work for my students”. A session that went poorly became a turning point for Katelyn: “After a session went poorly, I realised I was imposing my learning style on students. It was a moment of self-awareness that changed my approach”. Eva also embraced reflection to enhance inclusivity: “Reflecting on the feedback, I realized I needed to adapt my approach to be more inclusive”, and she noted the importance of understanding student needs: “Seeing a student struggle despite my efforts made me question if I really understood their needs. It pushed me to learn more about individualized learning”.

Rational Discourse

Constructive dialogues with peers and colleagues were crucial in refining their UDL applications. Avery emphasised the collective benefits of these discussions: “We had discussions in staff meetings about UDL, which helped me and my colleagues refine our strategies and understand its importance”. Personal experiences shared during faculty meetings fostered deeper understanding: “In our faculty meetings, I shared my failures and successes, which opened up a more honest conversation about what UDL really looks like in practice”. Lisa found value in debate: “Our team debates on UDL helped clarify many doubts and pushed us to try new methods”, stressing the importance of peer interactions in refining educational approaches: “Debating UDL strategies with peers helped me refine my approach, especially in how I designed assessments”.

Action

Reflection and dialogue culminated in practical changes. Lisa illustrated how she adapted her teaching to be more inclusive: “After understanding the barriers, I adapted my lesson plans to include multiple representations and more student choice”, and incorporated technology to provide flexible participation options: “I integrated technology in a way that students could choose how to participate in lectures, either interactively during class or through recorded sessions”. Eva also adjusted her teaching tools to enhance engagement: “I started using more interactive tools and adjusted my teaching methods to ensure all students could engage with the material”, and revised syllabi to cater to diverse learning needs: “I revised the course syllabus to include options for project formats—video, audio, or written—to cater to different learning preferences”.

This theme captures the transformative journey of emerging educational leaders as they navigate challenges, engage in reflective practice, and enact practical changes, demonstrating the evolving comprehension and application of UDL in fostering inclusive educational environments.

Transformative Perceptions of Inclusivity

This theme traces doctoral students’ evolving perceptions of inclusivity, stimulated by their engagement with Universal Design for Learning (UDL). It delineates their journey from initial resistance to a profound commitment to inclusivity, reshaping their leadership and teaching methodologies.

Disorienting Dilemma

Doctoral students initially encountered scepticism towards inclusivity that challenged prevailing norms. Sabrina articulates this resistance: “Students questioned the need for certain accommodations, which prompted discussions on inclusivity”. This scepticism catalysed further debates: “During a classroom discussion, I realized not all students saw the value in accessibility features, sparking a larger debate on inclusivity”. Katelyn echoes this sentiment: “I faced pushback on some UDL aspects from students, prompting me to rethink our approach”, and
recounts a pivotal moment: “A student’s question about the need for sign language interpreters shocked me, triggering a broader conversation”.

**Critical Reflection**

Following these challenges, participants engaged in deep reflection about their approaches to inclusivity. Taylor remarks: “Students began reflecting on their roles in an inclusive classroom, recognizing their part in fostering a supportive environment”. This reflection was enriched by direct encounters: “Hearing a visually impaired student’s challenges made me rethink my entire teaching strategy”. Avery adds: “Reflecting on these discussions helped students understand why inclusivity matters”, and acknowledges personal growth: “Realizing I had unconsciously marginalized some students was tough but necessary for my growth as an educator”.

**Rational Discourse**

Structured dialogues supported these reflective processes, enhancing collective commitment to inclusivity. Avery shares: “In class discussions, students shared their inclusivity insights, evolving throughout the course”, and notes the impact of wider interactions: “We organized a panel with diverse students, which was eye-opening for many”. Lisa discusses changes in classroom dynamics: “Talks shifted towards understanding each other’s needs rather than merely following rules”, and the value of feedback sessions: “Regular feedback became a space for students to express needs and for us to adjust”.

**Action**

Reflection and dialogue led to actionable changes within their educational contexts. Lisa illustrates student initiatives: “Students began taking initiative, creating more inclusive projects and presentations”, and details organisational impact: “We formed a student-led committee to tackle inclusivity issues, leading to significant changes in our program”. Eva highlights practical implementations: “After our sessions, students actively incorporated inclusivity into their projects”, and mentions equitable adjustments: “We modified assessment methods to be fairer, like providing extra time for those who need it”.

The journey from confronting initial resistance to adopting a dedicated approach to inclusivity underlines the transformative impact of UDL on educational leadership. Through disorienting dilemmas, reflective thinking, and rational discourse, doctoral students not only deepened their understanding of inclusivity but also drove meaningful changes in educational practices, epitomising UDL principles in their emergent leadership roles.

**Practical Impact of UDL on Educational Environments**

This theme reveals how doctoral students catalysed changes in organisational learning environments by implementing Universal Design for Learning (UDL), highlighting the tactical challenges and actions required to cultivate a more inclusive educational system.
Disorienting Dilemma

Participants initially grappled with institutional resistance which spurred a reevaluation of entrenched practices. Katelyn illustrates these early challenges: “The school’s rigid policies made implementing UDL difficult”, and elaborates on resistance to adaptive strategies: “Suggesting flexible seating faced considerable pushback”. Similarly, Sabrina recounts structural hurdles: “The inflexibility of our curriculum posed a major hurdle”, and observes the limitations of conventional methods: “Traditional evaluation approaches hindered the adoption of dynamic UDL strategies”.

Critical Reflection

Faced with these barriers, participants critically assessed and advocated for necessary organisational changes. Eva articulates this advocacy: “I evaluated our practices and pushed for more adaptable strategies”, noting the initial resistance: “My efforts to integrate UDL into faculty development were met with reluctance”. Taylor reflects on systemic inadequacies: “Our system was ill-prepared to support diverse learners”, recognising that transformative change requires a shift in mindset: “Realizing that changing organizational culture starts with mindset was both daunting and enlightening”.

Rational Discourse

Through rational discourse, broader acceptance and understanding of UDL were cultivated within these settings. Avery details the influence of discussions: “Meetings about UDL’s benefits led to greater staff acceptance”, and points to educational efforts: “We conducted workshops which slowly shifted skeptical views”. Katelyn underscores the impact of these initiatives: “Leading UDL strategy workshops helped some colleagues grasp its benefits”, and the importance of strategic advocacy: “We argued for UDL’s adoption across departments during planning meetings”.

Action

Reflective discussions precipitated organisational transformations. Lisa notes policy evolution: “Changes in school policies began to reflect UDL principles more closely”, and discusses the integration of new practices: “We mandated UDL training for all new hires, significantly altering our educational approach”. Sabrina details the application of these strategies: “Following discussions and trials, we overhauled our teaching methods to fully incorporate UDL”, highlighting observable outcomes: “Establishing a UDL resource center markedly enhanced student engagement and success”.

The journey of these doctoral students demonstrates their pivotal role in driving organisational change toward inclusivity and adaptability using UDL. By overcoming initial resistance, engaging in thoughtful reflection, fostering open dialogues, and enacting strategic modifications, they not only confronted but also reshaped educational leadership practices,
aligning them more closely with the principles of inclusivity and accessibility that UDL promotes.

The findings from this phenomenological study revealed the transformative experiences of doctoral students implementing UDL in educational leadership. Participants navigated initial uncertainties and challenges, such as resistance from peers and the need to reassess teaching strategies, which served as disorienting dilemmas that spurred deeper reflection and dialogue. Through critical reflection, participants reevaluated their assumptions and adapted their practices, demonstrating increased self-awareness and a commitment to inclusivity. Rational discourse among peers and faculty facilitated a clearer understanding and refinement of UDL strategies, leading to actionable changes in teaching methods and organisational practices. These actions included the adaptation of course syllabi to accommodate diverse learning preferences and the implementation of inclusive teaching methods, thereby enhancing organisational learning environments. Collectively, these findings underscore the significant role of transformative learning in fostering adaptive, inclusive, and effective educational leadership through the application of UDL principles.

Discussion

This discussion synthesises the findings from this phenomenological study on doctoral students’ implementation of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) within educational leadership. Each theme is examined in relation to the existing literature to reveal the transformative experiences of participants. This section highlights how UDL enhances inclusivity and organisational learning, contributing to ongoing discussions about its role in educational leadership programs.

Personal Adaptation of UDL Principles

The adaptive implementation of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) among doctoral students highlights their initial challenges and eventual mastery in integrating UDL principles effectively. Literature supports that encountering and overcoming such disorienting dilemmas is crucial for transformative learning and the successful adoption of inclusive teaching strategies (Mezirow, 1991). As evidenced by Taylor’s and Sabrina’s experiences, these challenges prompt critical reflection and experimentation, a process supported by Meyer et al. (2014), who argue that UDL implementation often involves iterative trial and error. Furthermore, the collaborative adjustments and strategic innovations observed align with Fovet (2021) and Craig et al. (2019) who note that effective UDL implementation requires both individual initiative and institutional support to foster truly inclusive educational environments.

Transformative Perceptions of Inclusivity

The evolution of student perceptions on inclusivity, as revealed through their engagement with Universal Design for Learning (UDL), underscores a significant shift from superficial understanding to deep, critical engagement with inclusivity principles. This transformation aligns
with Ngara’s (2022) findings that effective leadership in education necessitates a profound understanding and commitment to inclusivity to effect change. The participants’ journeys resonate with Yadav and Bhatia’s (2022) notion of reflective practice as a catalyst for deepening educational leaders’ commitment to inclusivity. The discourse and reflective practices that led to enhanced perceptions of inclusivity among students exemplify transformative learning processes, supporting the assertions by Hariharan and Anand’s (2023) that transformative learning is essential for the internalisation of inclusivity in educational practices.

Practical Impact of UDL on Educational Environments

The findings related to enhancing organisational learning environments reflect the interplay between individual agency and systemic change within educational institutions. The initial resistance and subsequent advocacy for Universal Design for Learning (UDL) echo Fullan’s (2007) argument that educational change involves challenging and reshaping existing norms and practices. The participants’ efforts to integrate UDL into organisational policies and practices demonstrate the critical role of transformative leadership in advocating for systemic change (Shields, 2010). This theme aligns with the work of Ince (2023) who emphasises the importance of adaptive leadership in navigating institutional barriers and fostering an inclusive culture within educational settings.

The discussion of these themes illustrates the dynamic processes through which doctoral students in educational leadership assimilate and apply UDL to drive inclusivity and organisational change. By navigating initial challenges, engaging in deep reflection and dialogue, and implementing strategic actions, these future leaders not only address but also reshape educational practices to be more inclusive. These findings contribute to the literature on educational leadership by highlighting the practical and transformative impacts of UDL, reaffirming its value as a framework for preparing educational leaders capable of fostering inclusive learning environments. This study’s implications for educational leadership underscore the necessity of incorporating UDL principles into leadership training programs to cultivate leaders who are adept at both envisioning and enacting transformative changes in educational settings.

Limitations of the Study

The phenomenological research design of this study focuses on deep, contextual experiences within a specific context; its direct applicability to other educational leadership practices is limited. Future research could address these limitations by including a more diverse participant pool. However, the study may encourage educators and leaders to reflect on their own contexts to extract actionable insights and adapt strategies, especially in educational leadership programs.
Conclusion

This phenomenological study has systematically explored how doctoral students in an educational leadership program apply and perceive the implementation of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) within the context of transformative learning theory in an educational leadership program. The investigation revealed three themes: the personal adaptation of UDL principles; transformative perceptions of inclusivity; and the practical impact of UDL on educational environments. These themes collectively underscore the transformative potential of UDL to foster inclusivity and adaptability in educational preparation programs.

The findings contribute to the broader discourse on educational leadership by highlighting the necessity for leaders to engage in continuous reflective practice and dialogue, which are central to implementing UDL effectively. This study extends the understanding of how educational leaders can utilise UDL not merely as a teaching strategy but as a comprehensive approach to fostering educational change.

Future research on UDL could expand through longitudinal studies to assess the sustainability and long-term effects of UDL implementations in educational leadership preparation programs, offering insights into the evolution of educational leadership practices and organisational culture. Comparative studies could also be valuable, examining UDL applications across different educational levels such as K–12 versus higher education, to understand contextual influences and identify unique challenges and successes at each educational level.

References


The Student Loan Debt Crisis in the United States and England and Its Economic Consequences

F. KING ALEXANDER

Student and graduate loan debt has become one of the most important higher education issues in the United States and England in recent years. Both countries have the undesirable distinction in being world leaders in student loan indebtedness. This article discusses how these two nations have created this expanding educational and economic crisis through national educational funding decisions and policies. The article also highlights the distinctive differences in government loan programs and the long-term economic consequences of not addressing this silent economic crisis.

To better understand the nearly $1.8 trillion student loan debt crisis in the United States, which impacts nearly 45 million college attendees and graduates, taxpayers need to recognize the complexity of the problem instead of simply blaming student loan borrowers as many federal and state politicians have recently done during loan forgiveness policy debates (Harass, 2023; Safier & Harrison, 2024). In the last 50 years, U.S. policy makers have created a federal funding scheme that has incentivised state governments to decrease funding effort and encourage tuition-based funding reliance on higher education (Alexander, 2021). As Arthur Hauptman pointed out in 2011, “common sense suggests that growing availability of student loans at reasonable rates has made it easier for many institutions to raise their prices, just as the mortgage interest deduction contributes to higher housing prices” (Inside Higher Education, 2011, para. 18). Adding to the complexity of this issue in the United States, the U.S. Supreme Court recently struck down President Biden’s massive student loan forgiveness plan that would have erased student loan debts for nearly 23 million borrowers. Since the ruling, President Biden has announced much more scaled down plans that have addressed only a fraction of this national problem.

Much like the U.S. higher education federal market-based funding system, England radically changed their university funding strategy and inflated university fees annually under the Conservative-Liberal Democratic coalition government from £3,290 in 2012 to the current rate of approximately £9,000/£9,250 or $15,000 to $17,000. According to Steve Smith, president of

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the higher education body, Universities, UK, “essentially, it allows universities to replace a large part of the lost state funding for teaching by way of graduate contributions” (Coughlan, 2010, para. 12). This national change reflects similar policy developments to that of most U.S. states since 1980. As a result of this major funding policy funding change, during the last decade alone England’s student loan debt has grown to over £200 billion with the average individual student debt exceeding £44,900 (Adams, 2023). England’s average amount of student debt leads all OECD nations with the U.S. coming in at a close second with student loan debt of $37,088.

Ironically, England’s move to a fee-based funding system differed significantly from other United Kingdom nations like Scotland who has remained a free or no student fee country. For example, in 1999/2000 England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland had similar average student loan debt of approximately £3,000 to £4,000. In 2023, England’s student loan debt averaged £44,940, Wales averaged £35,780, Northern Ireland averaged £24,500, and Scotland averaged £15,430 (Statista, 2023). Scotland’s student debt is not college fee-based, but loans granted based on cost of living indices. Table 1 shows comparative average student loan debt that the U.S. and England currently face when compared with selected countries.

**TABLE 1**

**Average Student Loan Debt Among Selected Nations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Avg. Public College Tuition/Fees</th>
<th>Avg. Student Loan Debt in U.S.$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>England</td>
<td>$15,000 - $17,000 (£9,000-£9,250)</td>
<td>$55,350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>$25,290 (in-state) - $40,940 (out-of-state)</td>
<td>$37,088</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scotland</td>
<td>$0</td>
<td>$20,000 Living only debt³</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>$6,693</td>
<td>$20,632</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>$10,429 - $22,937</td>
<td>$16,169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>$396 - $3,932</td>
<td>Low tuition/limited debt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Low to no tuition/fees</td>
<td>Living only debt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>$0</td>
<td>Living only debt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Zealand</td>
<td>$4,949</td>
<td>$14,791</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Sourced from OECD Education at a Glance, 2023, and Harress, C., 2023.*

**The Domino Effect for the United States and England**

At the nucleus of this issue in the U.S. are decades of state government disinvestment resulting in ongoing tuition and fee growth with the federal government backstopping the system through its over $100 billion in federal loan programs. As federal loans have expanded, state disinvestment increased as many public institutions have shifted their financial reliance from

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² Note. In addition to Germany, Sweden and Scotland mentioned above, these countries have no college tuition and fees: Brazil, Chile, Czech Republic, Denmark, Norway, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Latvia, Luxembourg, Poland and Mexico.

³ Government provides loans for cost-of-living debt outside of college.
state government to more tuition-based revenue models. The result is that current state government investment in public higher education is nearly 50% less in state “tax effort” or “fiscal capacity” than it was in 1980 (Alexander, 2021). Additionally, half of the states currently spend less in real dollars for public institutions than they did in 1991, while their enrolments during the same period increased by nearly 20%. In other words, annual per student funding has witnessed a precipitous decline in state funding per FTE student. To offset these state government funding reductions, student tuition and fee increases became a consistent consequence resulting in an ongoing increase in reliance of federal grant and loan programs. The overall “macro” problem with these public college financing trends is that since the early 1980s the United States has been quietly federalising the funding of the American higher education system indirectly through students and federal grant and loan programs, while also allowing state legislatures to move away from their longtime funding responsibilities.

Public colleges and universities were not the only U.S. institutions indirectly incentivised to become more student tuition and fee reliant. In reacting to the largess of these available federal loan programs, higher education institutions in the independent sector including not-for-profit private colleges and universities and for-profit institutions developed a fiscal addiction to the availability of federal loan programs. The disproportionate impact of these developments on underrepresented and lower income populations is only beginning to be understood. This has not only been a declining access issue for lower-income and underrepresented students because of ongoing cost escalation in the U.S., but an increasing racial disparity issue. A recent analysis regarding the racial disparities associated with U.S. student loan debtors shows that underrepresented students have significantly higher amounts owed as a percentage of the amount that was borrowed. Data from the National Center for Education Statistics as cited in the Council on Foreign Relations (2024) in Table 2 show the racial disparities in the average amounts owed as a percentage of the amount borrowed among federal student loan borrowers. These data indicate significant disadvantages for Black, Latinx and America Indian students, partly because they typically have lower levels of family wealth and are more likely to default on their loans than White students.

**TABLE 2**

*Average Amount Owed As a Percentage of Amount Borrowed Among Federal Student Loan Borrowers Four Years After Undergraduate Collegiate Graduation in 2020*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>105%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian/Alaska Native</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two or more races</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pacific Islander</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. National Center for Education Statistics as cited in Council on Foreign Relations (2024), figure 2.*

As mentioned earlier, England also has experienced a consistent pattern of government funding reductions particularly in university teaching, or in U.S. terms, operational budget funding. To
better understand how these reductions have occurred, it is important to describe the funding structure and major changes that have been developed within the last decade. There are two main elements of public spending on higher education in England. Direct funding through the funding council for teaching and research, and student loans for maintenance and fees. Support through the funding council for teaching was cut significantly from 2012 to 2015 after the decision to escalate university fees by the government. Within one decade, the 2021-2022 total funding for teaching was 78% below the 2010-2011 figure in real terms according to a research briefing “Higher education funding in England” (Bolton, 2021). These funding changes were a consequence of the substantial shift to student fees which rapidly escalated the student loan debt problem in England. Unlike the United States, which had a much more gradual increase in reliance on student tuition and fees over four decades, England’s policy adaptation to more market-based student fee reliance has occurred in rapid fashion. This development is primarily due to an important distinction between England’s centrally controlled student fee system and the United States more free-market tuition and fee setting authority. In the U.S., student tuition and fee authority is state-based and in many cases institutional-based. Table 3 shows how rapidly England along with the United States have become global leaders in average student loan debt according to a recent report in a House of Commons briefing report and the U.S. Department of Education.

**TABLE 3**

*Student Loan Debt University Graduates for England and the U.S. 2010-2023*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>£17,100</td>
<td>$26,505</td>
<td>$19,298</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>£18,620</td>
<td>$29,047</td>
<td>$21,860</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>£21,860</td>
<td>$30,069</td>
<td>$24,757</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>£32,330</td>
<td>$40,735</td>
<td>$27,759</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>£35,670</td>
<td>$47,441</td>
<td>$30,548</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>£40,910</td>
<td>$49,910</td>
<td>$33,548</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2022</td>
<td>£44,730</td>
<td>$55,018</td>
<td>$36,510</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2023</td>
<td>£44,940</td>
<td>$46,018</td>
<td>$37,088</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* The dollar value of the pound dropped significantly 2022 to 2023


It also is important to note that unlike funding support declines for teaching at universities in England, research funding for universities has been relatively stable in real terms since 2010 (Bolton, 2021).
In addition, England’s rapid student loan debt increase has been accelerated by policies that have replaced government grants with loans, higher student numbers, and expansion of loans to part-time and postgraduate students (Bolton, 2023). The ultimate cost to the public sector is currently thought to be around 53% of the face value of loans to full-time undergraduates. Another problem in England, which is comparable to the U.S., was that rapid student loan debt increases and the Government subsidies needed were exacerbated by problems associated with the coronavirus pandemic.

The large increase in fee income in England (from home and EU students) since 2012 has meant that the “total” funding for institutions through regulated fees and funding council allocations increased in real terms in each year from 2011-12 to 2019-20. Also, much like many U.S. states, English university student enrolments increased as well over this period.

However, that is where the similarities in the U.S. and English higher education systems end. England’s primary distinctive difference from the U.S. resides in the way that the UK handles its student loans when compared to the U.S. system. The UK has two different types of student loans, both distributed through local regulatory bodies. The Tuition Fee Loan program is designed to cover your university fee costs. The Maintenance Loan program is designed to support the living expenses of students as mentioned earlier.

Another major difference between the U.S. and UK systems is how student loans get repaid. As in the U.S., the UK and English students must repay their student loans. However, in the UK loan payments are capped at 9% of your annual income. In the U.S., student loan repayment amounts are taken out of the student’s paycheck. For individuals, the debt amounts up to $38,000 for federal and $55,000 for private education on average which is usually accompanied by higher interest rates. In the U.S., students usually start paying their loans back six to nine months after graduation. Also, unlike the UK, the U.S. has overly complicated income contingent repayment plans that are difficult to acquire and understand. Only approximately 35% of U.S. borrowers are engaged in the income contingent repayment plans due to multiple complications including the use of private commercial vendors. In England, the vast majority of student loan borrowers are included in the government income contingent repayment programs.

However, in a recent attempt to address this student debt problem in England, the Office of Budget Responsibility adopted numerous reforms in February 2022. First, the Government extended the loan forgiveness program from 30 years to 40 years. Second, they maintained the income-contingent repayment minimum to begin at a salary of £27,295 for all current payers. For new borrowers beginning in 2023-2024 until 2026-2027, the new repayment threshold will begin at £25,000.

However, much like the U.S. student loan debt problem, recent reports indicate that these new reforms could disproportionately impact underrepresented and other student populations in England. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies and the Department of Education, England’s student loan reforms are estimated to be better off for wealthy undergraduates, while women, disadvantaged students, and those from poorer regions like the north and Midlands will be disproportionately disadvantaged (Ogden et al., 2024). These government changes include all current students that enrolled since 2022-2023.
The Emerging Economic Consequences

Both nations are trying to address this increasing debt crisis through multiple methods and strategies. According to a warning from U.S. Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell, “As [it] goes on and as student loans continue to grow and become larger and larger, then it absolutely could hold back [the economy]” (Cox, 2018, para. 9). If important reforms and recalibrations are left unattended, the problem that college graduates are facing today will have economic consequences for every business, government agency, and English and American citizen.

The economic consequences of this complicated issue are already beginning to affect both England’s and the U.S. economy by discouraging entrepreneurship and small business development, housing and automobile purchasing, career choices, job satisfaction, and most consumer markets (de Gayardon et al., 2018). In 2019, the Federal Reserve Bank issued a report highlighting a national decline in homeownership rates and especially among young Americans in their 20s and 30s, who experienced nearly twice the decline in homeownership as the general population between 2005–2014. The Federal Reserve also reported that student debt accounted for nearly one quarter of the overall decline and precluded 400,000 young adults from buying homes during that period. The report also noted that the rise in education debt increased borrowers’ odds of default adversely impacting their credit scores and ability to apply for a mortgage.

More recently, in the last three years the rate of millennial renters giving up on home ownership has increased by 65.7%. The foreseen danger in the housing market is that we are creating a generation of renters and not buyers. Ultimately, consistent declines in home ownership will cause a significant decrease in revenue for banks and investment firms that lobbied against the Biden Administration’s Student Loan Forgiveness Program.

Another long-lasting economic impact of massive student indebtedness for England and the U.S. is a reduction in consumer spending power of those with student loan debt. It is estimated that each time a graduate or non-graduate student’s debt-to-income increases 1%, their consumer consumption declines by as much as 3.7% according to Education Data Initiative (Hansen, 2023). Also, in a 2018 LendingTree survey, 1 in 10 borrowers said they could not pay for a new car due to their student debt. In addition to homeownership and automobile consumer markets, areas such as clothing, home repairs, entertainment, travel, and grocery goods are all beginning to understand what saddling the next generation of American consumers with substantial student loan debt will ultimately mean for their bottom-line profits.

Moreover, rising student loan debt will prevent young people from saving for their retirement, weathering financial crises, and increasingly being reliant on social programs and government agencies. Demographically, the rise of student debt is already delaying marriage and family formation, which is increasingly becoming an issue of national concern. These economic and societal effects are not short-term and also disproportionately impact Black, Hispanic and female student loan borrowers.

England is beginning to feel many of the same economic consequences as the U.S. with regard to massive student loan debt. As higher education costs continue to grow while government funding declines, student loan debt has become a societal consequence disadvantaging emerging younger generations, especially those from underrepresented
backgrounds. For two of the world’s most economically advanced nations, we must rethink how we are funding our colleges and universities, or we will witness for the first time in history a younger generation that will have less economic and educational opportunity than their parents enjoyed.

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Comprehensive History of ACEL

Written by Dr Marie Jansen (FACEL)


How It All Started: The History of ACEL

In the literature of professionalism, there is general agreement that the establishment of a professional association represents an important early step in the evolution of an occupation into a full profession. The founding of the Australian Council for Educational Administration in 1973 is linked to this concept of an “emerging” profession. By the 1950’s the study of educational administration as a discipline, still in its infancy in Australia, was already well established in the USA. Goldhammer recalled the excitement of those early years: “It was great to be an administrator and scholar of educational administration in the decade of the 1950’s, but to be young and have a part in the rebuilding of a professional orientation was heaven”.

The field was permeated with a new enthusiasm and hope that out of the new research and analysis would come the true foundation for a sound professional approach to educational administration. The efforts of these “administrators and scholars” had led to the formation of the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA), an organisation representing major universities in the United States and Canada, established with the aim of advancing research and development in educational administration.

In the mid 1960’s, an enthusiastic Australian, William Walker, was a Visiting Professor at the University of California at Berkley. He was asked to organise a conference for educational administrators “in his spare time”, with a grant from the Kellogg Foundation. This 1966 conference became known as the First International Intervisitation Program – participants held a residential seminar in Michigan during week 1, visited U.S. universities in weeks 2 and 3, before assembling in Alberta to report their findings. Enthusiasm ran high. A Second International Intervisitation Program was held in Australia in 1970, at the University of New England in Armidale. Already Walker had observed:

Educational administrators had virtually no tradition of working together or of a professional association; unlike doctors and psychiatrists, they had not formed any such significant professional group.

Walker’s vision for a Commonwealth-wide association for educational administrators had begun to set root. By the time the IIP delegates had completed their orientation session in Sydney, dispersed throughout Australian universities for 2 weeks, and reassembled at the University of New England, Walker was ready to propose the establishment of the Commonwealth Council for Educational Administration.

One observer noted:

In the initial discussions it was evident that there were misgivings as to the viability of such an organisation. The clouds of doubt were dispelled by a masterly exposition from
Bill Walker. I can recall most vividly the feeling of excitement, exhilaration and exuberance when the roll was called of representatives of 14 Commonwealth countries and it was resolved that a (British) Commonwealth Council for Educational Administration should be established.

An offer to house the CCEA Secretariat at the University of Calgary in Canada was rejected when the University of New England, offered its support. Bill Walker became the first President, and Ross Thomas was elected Secretary. In June 1971, the Commonwealth Foundation in the United Kingdom agreed to support the establishment of CCEA financially. Walker commented: “Thus was the infant equipped for the first time with real teeth!”

The CCEA Executive in Armidale then commenced one of its primary tasks – encouraging the establishment of national, regional and local professional bodies in educational administration.

Walker recalled:

The first thing we did was to use the Old Girls and Old Boys network. The people who had done the Ed. Admin course, or people we knew from other contacts – quite often a Director or a Director-General – we wrote to them and said: “Look we’d like to have a meeting in Melbourne or Sydney or Brisbane or wherever. I’ll come along with Ross Thomas. Can we get together and look at the desirability of establishing an institute?”

From 1972, groups began to form in capital cities and provincial centres around Australia.

1973: ACEA is founded

In 1973, ACEA become only the second national body to be established under the auspices of the then (British) Commonwealth Council for Educational Administration (the first being the British Educational Administration Society.) Walker observed:

This provides an interesting contrast with other professional groups, whose national bodies are usually in existence before any international organisation is set up.

Representatives from each state or regional association in Australia, already members of CCEA, were invited by the CCEA Executive to attend a meeting in Canberra in November 1972, where general support for the formation of a national council was expressed. These representatives assembled again in Sydney for 2 days in May 1973 to found the Australian Council for Educational Administration.

The question of how ACEA would differ from the Australian College of Education became a major point of discussion among participants on Day 1. The majority were of the opinion that the proposed new body would allow for a broader membership than the College and would also provide a concentration on educational administration which was not evident in the ACE.

On Day 2, 18 May 1973, delegates resolved unanimously that a national body of educational administrators be established. Constituent groups were Queensland, Sydney, Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia, the ACT, Riverina and Darling Downs. Harry Harris (Sydney) was elected Foundation President and Bob Pearson (Queensland) Vice-
President. Among those who attended the inaugural meeting of the new ACEA Board, which met in Canberra on 19 November 1973, was the driving force behind ACEA’S establishment, Bill Walker. He later recalled that he came away from that meeting, humming to himself... “The country’s in the best hands”.

**2002 A New Chapter Begins: The Name Change to ACEL**

For several years, the Board of Directors discussed the possibility of a change of name for the Council to better reflect modern conceptions of the nature of educational administration. As scholarly thinking of the nature and distribution of leadership in organisations developed, it was felt that the inclusion of the term leaders in the name of the Council more accurately reflected the current and future aims of the organisation.

In 2002, the Board of Directors recommended that the name of the organisation be changed to Australian Council for Educational Leaders. This was passed at the 2002 Annual General Meeting of the Council.

**2008: ACEL Begins a New Chapter**

In 2008 the members of ACEL approved the transition from an incorporated association to a Company Limited by Guarantee. The Australian Council for Educational Leaders Ltd came into being on the 11th August, 2008. This governance change has enabled ACEL to take its place both nationally and globally in offering strategic direction and professional learning programs for those committed to improving outcomes for schools and their students.
A Statement of Commitment to the Profession of Teaching was developed by the Queensland Executive of the Australian Council for Educational Leaders (ACEL). 

A STATEMENT OF COMMITMENT TO THE PROFESSION OF TEACHING

I acknowledge that I am a member of a profession that extends to me the opportunity and the privilege to make a positive difference in the lives of young people.

I bring to the profession my unique talents to teach and to lead, which I commit to nurturing and developing throughout my career.

I understand that teaching is a deeply human endeavour. While I teach subjects, ideas and skills, above all I teach young people, who are our future.

I recognise and respect the body of distinct theory and knowledge which is gifted to me by those who have come before. I draw from it and strive to contribute further to it.

I recognise that young people learn in different ways and at different rates. I believe that given appropriate support and resourcing, all young people can learn, and I strive to nurture a love of learning that will help every young person to succeed.

I make judgements to evaluate student achievement through assessment that is valid, reliable and fair, and I give value to those learnings that cannot be measured.

I recognise that teaching is a collaborative profession and I am not the only teacher in a young person’s life. My work is enriched through working with my colleagues, learning from them and contributing to their practice.

I acknowledge the contribution of the many parents, caregivers, and teachers past, present and future who contribute to a young person’s education. I work with them wherever possible to enrich the learning of young people.

I offer a spirit of optimism, resilience and hope as I support young people to develop and act on the values, beliefs and capabilities that guide them throughout their lives.

I recognise the changing nature of knowledge, and I commit to continuous learning throughout my professional career.

In committing to this statement I accept the responsibilities of being a teacher, and acknowledge the deep trust placed in me by young people, parents, caregivers and society.

7 April 2017

The consultation, development and production of the statement were facilitated by the Australian Council for Educational Leaders (Queensland)
Context of the Statement

What is the Statement of Commitment?

The statement is a voluntary declaration of commitment to a set of values and beliefs for the teaching profession in Australia.

Why was the Statement of Commitment developed?

In 2015 the Queensland Executive of the Australian Council for Educational Leaders (ACEL) researched the criteria of established professions, with a view to ascertaining whether there exists a common set of criteria that comprise a profession. It was agreed that teaching clearly meets all but one of the criteria evident in the research. What is missing is a deep statement of ethically based values and beliefs that complements existing legislative and regulatory instruments.

The Executive resolved to lead the development of a professional statement that captures the spirit of the former Charter for the Australian Teaching Profession (Teaching Australia) and that of similar documents from other professions, and which speaks to all teachers.

Who has contributed to the development of the Statement?

The development of the statement was made possible through consultation with, and invaluable contributions from the following professional groups and their representatives:

Association of Special Education Administrators Queensland, Australian College of Educators, Early Childhood Teachers’ Association, Independent Schools Parents’ Network, Independent Schools Queensland, Isolated Children’s Parents’ Association, Joint Council of Queensland Teachers’ Associations, Parents and Citizens Queensland, Queensland Association of State School Principals, Queensland Catholic Education Commission, Queensland College of Teachers, Queensland Department of Education and Training, Queensland Independent Education Union, Queensland Secondary Principals’ Association, Queensland Teachers’ Union, Queensland University of Technology, University of Queensland, University of Southern Queensland, and University of the Sunshine Coast.

How might the Statement of Commitment be used?

It is hoped that the statement will inspire and engage teachers to take pride in being members of the teaching profession. The statement can be used formally or informally, at graduation ceremonies, induction ceremonies, celebrations of transitional moments in the careers of early childhood, primary and secondary teachers, or for recommitment to the profession for long-serving teachers. It can be used by teacher educators in their work with pre-service students, at the beginning and end of their courses. When using the statement, systems, schools, universities and professional associations may wish to brand the statement with their own identification.
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Journal of the Australian Council for Educational Leaders
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