

INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP: PERCEPTIONS OF ASSISTANT PRINCIPALS ON
THEIR WORK PRE- AND POST- COVID-19

by

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When I was contemplating pursuing my doctorate, I ran across a quote by Tim McClure, which said, “The biggest concern for any organization should be when their most passionate people become quiet.” This quote resonated with me, and I knew that I needed to go back to school to be a larger part of the change in the educational system.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to identify the perceptions of assistant principals as instructional leaders, pre- and post-COVID. This study addressed three research questions: 1) How do assistant principals define and enact instructional leadership? 2) What supports or hinders assistant principals' efforts to engage in instructional leadership/function as instructional leaders? 3) How has instructional leadership for assistant principals (d)evolved throughout the COVID-19 response efforts? Survey participants included 59 secondary Texas Region XI assistant principals, with 10 assistant principals participating in the interview portion of the study. A sequential explanatory mixed-methods design was used to examine elements of instructional leadership and how assistant principals perceived their roles. Rich, thick descriptions were used to convey assistant principals' perceptions as instructional leaders pre- and post-COVID. The findings revealed that assistant principals felt they enacted instructional leadership primarily by supporting teachers, visiting classrooms, participating in professional learning communities, and building relationships with teachers outside the classroom. Assistant principals felt supported as instructional leaders when their campus principal supported their work as instructional leaders and had support from their peers. Although the assistant principals interviewed were dedicated to being instructional leaders, factors that hindered them from doing this critical work included responding to "fires," managing time, and expectations from central administration and the community. As assistant principals navigated through the 2020-2021 school year, COVID-19 affected their roles as instructional leaders, often requiring campus leaders to focus on safety protocols over instruction. At the time the study concluded, the pandemic was still affecting schools, and long-term changes were unable to be identified.

Keywords: assistant principal, instructional leaders, chaos theory, pandemic, COVID

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Contents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	ii
ABSTRACT	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS	iv
LIST OF FIGURES	vi
LIST OF TABLES	vii
PREFACE	viii
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	1
Introduction	1
Background of Problem	2
COVID Complications	5
Purpose of the Study and Guiding Questions	6
Significance of the Study	6
Definition of Important Terms	9
Summary	9
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW	11
Introduction	11
Instructional Leadership	11
History of Instructional Leadership	12
Instructional Leadership Defined	15
Instructional Leadership Models	21
Principals as Instructional Leaders	25
Role of Assistant Principals	26
The Evolution of the Position	26
Principal Preparation Programs and Professional Development	28
Stress, Turnover, and Barriers to Instructional Leadership	30
Assistant Principal Evaluations	32
Conceptual Framework	33
Instructional Leadership	33
Chaos and Complexity Theory	35
Summary	39
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY	40
Research Design	40
Study Context	42
Procedures	42
Participants	42
Data Collection	45
Data Analysis	47
Credibility	48
Limitations	49
Positionality	50
Summary	51
CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS	52

Introduction.....	52
Research Question 1: Instructional Leadership Defined and Enacted.....	52
Supporting Teachers.....	53
Classroom Visits	54
Professional Learning Communities (PLCs).....	56
Outside the Classroom	57
Perceptions	59
Compared to the Wallace Foundation Model	62
Research Question 2: Supports and Barriers of Assistant Principals	64
Factors that Supported Assistant Principals as Instructional Leaders.....	65
Factors that Hindered Assistant Principals as Instructional Leaders	70
Research Question 3: Effects of COVID on Assistant Principals	76
Transition from Pre-COVID to Post-COVID Practices	76
Post-COVID	82
Chaos Theory and COVID.....	92
Study Conclusions	96
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION.....	98
Considerations.....	98
Study Recommendations	100
Recommendations for Campus Principals	101
Recommendations for School District Administrators	105
Recommendations for Assistant Principal Certification Programs.....	110
Implications for Future Research.....	113
Principal’s Role as an Instructional Leader.....	113
Redefining Perceptions of Instructional Leadership	114
Post-COVID	114
Conclusion	115
REFERENCES	116
APPENDICES	128
Appendix A: Phase One Consent Form and Survey.....	128
Appendix B: Semi-structured Interview Questions	141
Appendix C: Qualitative Descriptive Codes.....	143

LIST OF FIGURES

Figures

Figure 1 Complexity Theory and the “New Normal”	35
Figure 2 “The Lorenz Attractor” by Edward Lorenz.....	36
Figure 3 Instructional Leadership During COVID-19.....	38
Figure 4 Conceptual Framework: AP as Instructional Leader Shaped Through COVID	39
Figure 5 Pre-COVID: Assistant Principal Perceptions as an Instructional Leader	88
Figure 6 Post-COVID: Assistant Principal Perceptions as an Instructional Leader	88

LIST OF TABLES

Table

Table 1 Phase Two Participant Demographics	44
Table 2 Assistant Principal Assignments Pre- and Post-COVID	61
Table 3 Duties Consuming the Most Time Pre- and Post-COVID.....	77
Table 4 Perceptions of Assistant Principals: Creating Effective Systems for Learning	78
Table 5 Assistant Principal Perception: Instructional Leadership Components Pre- and Post-COVID	84

PREFACE

After serving as an assistant principal for six years in two different school districts, I often reflect on how many conversations I have had with other assistant principals who struggled to be the instructional leaders they desired to be for teachers and students. Having the opportunity to be in a unique role as an assistant principal focused solely on instruction, I knew this was not the norm for most administrators. There were many conversations around the struggles of time management, leadership expectations, and assistant principals' ever-changing role. The conversation was never around assistant principals who did not want to focus on instructional leadership but more around balancing all responsibilities and prioritizing instruction while juggling other tasks.

With all the tasks thrown their way, assistant principals struggle with dedicating time to focus on instruction, often making them feel like they were leaving a job undone. These assistant principals, who were crucial to the school's success, felt undervalued for their time and efforts, yet were passionate about the work and knew how to influence schools positively. Then, SARS-CoV-2, also known as COVID-19, hit. Was there even a need for assistant principals anymore? Now that students were suddenly moved to remote learning, the assistant principal's responsibilities of school safety, managing student discipline, and visiting classrooms, among many others, abruptly changed. With discipline issues minimized, teachers planning remote and in-person lessons, and students learning from home, there was confusion about what assistant principals would do to lead instruction. This confusion has led many school leaders to rethink administrators' roles and look at education in a way that has never been looked at before.

The new unknown left many administrators and educators weary of what was to come in the year ahead. According to a study by the National Association of Secondary School

Principals, “forty-five percent of principals said that pandemic conditions are prompting them to leave the job sooner than they had previously planned” (Maxwell, 2020, para. 2). Was this the same for assistant principals? Was the work ahead too demanding on top of an already overburdened position, to the point where campus administrators would choose to leave the profession due to the unknown stress? Or was this finally the opportunity for assistant principals to serve as the instructional leaders they had envisioned now that issues such as discipline were minimized? During this time of chaos, was this the opportunity for campus leaders to rethink their roles and define a new instructional leadership outlook? If so, how might virtual instructional leadership even look?

In the spring of 2020, I experienced these feelings as I found myself in a position of uncertainty. I was serving as a high school associate principal when COVID-19 temporarily closed schools. During this time, I remember the feeling of helplessness as the functions of schools drastically changed. I wondered: What would my role look like in this new setting, and how would I use this opportunity to influence positive change? Was this our chance to redesign the defining elements of instructional leadership and the role of assistant principals? From this state of confusion, this study evolved in the hopes of finding that assistant principals would be given the opportunity to redefine their roles as instructional leaders.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Assistant principals are not only responsible for ensuring student achievement, but they are also responsible for day-to-day school operations, often including student discipline, managing textbook distribution, facilitating Special Education Admission, Review, and Dismissal (ARD) meetings, and 504 meetings, among many other tasks (Calabrese, 1991; Hunt, 2011; Marshall, 1992; Marshall et al., 2006; Searby et al., 2017). While visiting classrooms and observing teachers is a significant part of the assistant principal's job, some models integrate instructional leadership enacted outside of the classroom (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Zuckerman et al., 2020).

There is an abundance of research on principals as instructional leaders (Horng & Loeb, 2010; Lutrick & Szabo, 2012; Oleszewski et al., 2012; Searby et al., 2017; Taylor Backor & Gordon, 2015); however, the issue of assistant principals as instructional leaders is understudied (see Barnett et al., 2012; Morgan, 2018; Searby et al., 2017). Although there is the perception that assistant principals are instructional leaders, the nature of the assistant principalship (a sometimes overwhelmingly broad role) affects what instructional leadership looks like in practice. The reality of the position and the perception of the position do not always align (Glanz, 2004; Morgan, 2018). This misalignment can spur feelings within assistant principals that they are not valued for their work (Armstrong, 2009; Morgan, 2018).

Even though reality may not match the perception, one responsibility of assistant principals is to improve student achievement by serving as campus instructional leaders (Gurley et al., 2015; Uddin et al., 2020). However, they do not always know where to find the time to serve as an instructional leader, or at least not to the extent they would often like to. Not only is

improving instruction and student achievement the responsibility of assistant principals, but assistant principal evaluation instruments also often align with instructional leadership standards (Catano & Stronge, 2006; Kimball et al., 2015). With assistant principals balancing and prioritizing managerial tasks and building a school focused on instruction, the question arises: How do assistant principals spend their day, and how much emphasis is on instructional leadership?

With a mismatch between expectations and practice, principal preparation programs also contribute to the misalignment of expectations. Although principal preparation programs often highlight instructional leadership, the focus is often oriented toward a principal's role, not that of the assistant principal (Oleszewski et al., 2012; Searby et al., 2017). The lack of specific job preparation appropriate to the assistant principal's role leaves assistant principals learning the position while on the job. Assistant principals often do not feel adequately prepared for instructional leadership, nor are they typically provided necessary professional development while in the position (Johnston et al., 2016; Searby et al., 2017). With this preparation gap, there is a disconnect of what it means to be an instructional leader within the assistant principal role, making the job more challenging. Open questions, then, are: (1) In what ways does instructional leadership look different for the assistant principal than the principal; and (2) To what degree are assistant principals provided necessary professional learning to be successful in their roles?

Background of Problem

There must be an understanding of assistant principals' responsibilities and what it means to be instructional leaders to understand how assistant principals serve as instructional leaders. Not only have school leaders' responsibilities changed, an understanding of what it means to be an effective instructional leader has also changed, especially during the transition from brick-

and-mortar schools to virtual classrooms (Darling-Hammond & Hylar, 2020; Hudson et al., 2020; Louis et al., 2010).

While campus administrators have many responsibilities, often assistant principals are assigned specific duties and responsibilities and become experts in these specific areas, such as discipline, testing, and special services (Hunt, 2011). This particular organizational structure is designed for assistant principals to specialize in specific fields and increase efficiency, leading to missed opportunities for assistant principals to learn about and gain direct experience with all campus leadership facets. This organization of responsibilities may lead assistant principals to feel unprepared for the principalship, especially as school and community environments continue to change and become more diverse (Hunt, 2011; Oliver, 2005). This lack of experience in all areas includes a deficit in instructional leadership, especially as assistant principals often learn on the job with little formal support (Louis et al., 2010; Searby et al., 2017). With principals being the gatekeepers of duty assignments, instructional leadership does not always fall to the assistant principals (Armstrong, 2009; Morgan, 2018).

Nevertheless, as the system continues to change and evolve, no longer is the principal solely responsible for being the instructional leader on campus (Celikten, 2001; Hallinger, 2005). Principals are often called into meetings, frequently off-campus, making it hard to find the time to get into classrooms and support campus instruction directly. As assistant principals lead departments, they are responsible for being active in both the classroom and professional learning communities (PLCs), but other tasks, often managerial, pull their attention away from instruction (Calabrese, 1991; Celikten, 2001; Marshall and Hooley, 2006; Oleszewski et al., 2012). All campus administrators must be prepared to address the concerns in the principal's absence, including instructional leadership (Celikten, 2001; Hallinger, 2005). Principals are

responsible for ensuring instructional leadership for their particular campus, and it is their responsibility to share the ownership with their administrative team (Celikten, 2001; Hallinger, 2005).

Assistant principals are charged with being competent instructional leaders on campus, but what does that truly mean, and what professional development is provided to equip them with the necessary skills? Several studies assert that assistant principals voice concerns about not feeling fully prepared for the position and often feel their time is dedicated to non-instructional tasks (Calabrese, 1991; Celikten, 2001; Marshall and Hooley, 2006; Oleszewski et al., 2012). Assistant principals' time is consumed with discipline and meetings, often sending messages that instructional leadership is not a priority (Calabrese, 1991; Celikten, 2001; Marshall and Hooley, 2006; Oleszewski et al., 2012). The assistant principal's role is vital to schools' success, but with the principal as the primary instructional leader, assistant principals are often dissatisfied with their work in general, especially as instructional leaders (Armstrong, 2009; Morgan, 2018).

According to Searby et al. (2017), the assistant principal's role as an instructional leader, along with their current job description, is often not researched. This lack of research leads to a considerable need to see how these particular professionals play a critical role in supporting student achievement and campus culture. Although there are several successful principal preparation programs, there is a concern of these programs not preparing leaders for school leadership's modern-day demands (Grissom et al., 2019). Even with numerous and various responsibilities, assistant principals are still expected to lead campus instruction (Morgan, 2018; Uddin et al., 2020). However, they may not clearly understand what that may look like within the role of the assistant principal.

COVID Complications

Prior to COVID-19, assistant principals had enough frustration as they tried to balance their responsibilities (Marshall & Hooley, 2006) with limited time and high expectations (Celikten, 2001). In this study, pre-COVID-19 is defined as prior to March 2020, when the potential of the virus to spread exponentially caused schools to close and remove to a remote setting. Within the brick-and-mortar school setting, pre-COVID-19, assistant principals were continually working to enhance their instructional leadership skills and prioritizing their responsibilities to allow time to focus on instructional leadership (Uddin et al., 2020). For example, assistant principals balanced their day-to-day responsibilities, including attending PLCs, coaching and developing teachers, and working discipline, among other things in the meantime. With a sudden change to remote learning due to the pandemic, assistant principals were challenged to rethink their role as instructional leaders and learn how to support teachers remotely, including advancing their instructional technology knowledge and the teachers' knowledge.

Before the pandemic, administrators supported students and teachers face-to-face, but as schools abruptly transitioned to remote learning, assistant principals found discipline and attendance de-emphasized and reshaped. However, more support was needed to support teachers and students with instruction (Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2020). Within the virtual setting, campus leaders have had no choice but to rethink instructional leadership best to meet teachers' and students' different needs. With little preparation, how did the assistant principal's work evolve or devolve during this world crisis, and what are the implications for the future of instructional leadership in various contexts (e.g., in-person, virtual, hybrid)? As administrators adapt to the changes caused by COVID-19, this study explored whether and how administrators

took advantage of this opportunity to redefine the role of assistant principals as instructional leaders.

Purpose of the Study and Guiding Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore how the role-in-practice of assistant principals shapes, reshapes, and influences the way campus administrators think about and enact instructional leadership and how the educational crisis brought about by COVID-19 has influenced the shape and scope of this work. This study can help researchers, practitioners, and policymakers better understand how assistant principals perceive their role as instructional leaders, as it, in part, explored what hinders or assists assistant principals in being the instructional leaders they desire to be. The study is grounded in, but also moves beyond, traditional schooling structures to consider how instructional leadership specific to the assistant principal role has (d)evolved through the transition from brick-and-mortar schools to virtual learning in response to the disrupting force of COVID-19. To these ends, the study was guided by three overarching research questions:

1. How do assistant principals define and enact instructional leadership?
2. What supports or hinders assistant principals' efforts to engage in instructional leadership/function as instructional leaders?
3. How has instructional leadership for assistant principals (d)evolved throughout the COVID-19 response efforts?

Significance of the Study

This study is significant for many reasons, primarily as it can provide insight into assistant principals' efforts to engage in robust instructional leadership and how disruptions to status quo schooling (in this case, the COVID-19 pandemic) may influence these efforts. This

study aimed to provide district leaders a better understanding of what training and support assistant principals need to feel competent in their position. This study also aimed to understand better how assistant principals' roles as instructional leaders (d)evolved during the transition to virtual learning during COVID-19. Because assistant principals play a vital role in school operations and can create change, especially around instructional leadership, it is essential and beneficial to increase the amount of research focused on the assistant principals' role in leading instruction, both in and out of periods of crisis.

With assistant principals evaluated on instructional leadership in the form of overseeing teachers and classroom instruction, this study may help provide context to preparation programs and guide district leaders on how to support their campus assistant principals better. Assistant principals are just as close to the work of teaching and learning as principals and district leaders (and perhaps even closer in terms of day-to-day encounters with teachers and students). According to Allen and Weaver (2014), "Research indicates that school leadership is fundamental in influencing school effectiveness and that principals who focus on teaching and learning greatly influence student performance" (p. 16). To continue to see effective leadership and increase student achievement, it is vital to understand the assistant principal's role as instructional leaders and understand what barriers block school success.

With better insight into assistant principals' role as instructional leaders, principals and district leaders can better support their work and build capacity in assistant principals to support students and teachers. As assistant principals are better developed, there is hope that the transition from assistant principal to the principal role is seamless. As principals have a better understanding of how their assistant principals perceive their job as instructional leaders,

principals will identify the skills needed by assistant principals to influence instruction positively.

Lastly, education will forever look different due to the rapid changes caused by the coronavirus pandemic. Educators respond to new needs, often in new and shifting contexts, and assistant principals are redefining their role as virtual instructional leaders (Hudson et al., 2020). While we may not have predicted this particular crisis, administrators are often faced with other crises. How do leaders decide to move forward when chaos appears, and how do they evolve with new circumstances? Change within a school is not always immediate, but school leaders have had no choice but to make decisions quickly to pivot toward school practices to best support teachers and students during this uncertain time. As schools prepared to reopen in the fall of 2020, educators at all levels found themselves searching for resources and training to offer quality remote instruction. This study is significant because assistant principals are critical for schools' success and student learning, even more so now, with the effects of a pandemic. We can only assume at this time that schools will never return to how they were prior to COVID-19.

Assistant principals are often the first line of communication between teachers and campus leadership, and they are held responsible for working closely with teachers to increase student engagement and achievement (Uddin et al., 2020). While instructional leadership was defined in the traditional school setting, pre-pandemic, COVID-19 has added new instructional leadership challenges. With the increase of technology-dependent systems, rapidly changing school structures, and the unknowns of responding to COVID-19, assistant principals are tasked with even more as they function as instructional leaders in a new environment.

Definition of Important Terms

Within this study, a few terms are unique to the COVID pandemic and the timing of the study. For clarity purposes, the terms ‘instructional leadership’ and ‘assistant principal’ are also defined.

Instructional leadership. Instructional leadership is learning-focused leadership that helps teachers improve their instructional capacity and assist students’ academic achievement.

Assistant principal. An assistant principal is a school administrator who has completed a degree program in educational leadership and has passed the required certification exams. An assistant principal serves under the campus principal and is responsible for facilitating the school's day-to-day operations.

COVID-19. COVID-19 is a respiratory illness in humans caused by a coronavirus. The virus can produce severe symptoms and, in some cases, death, especially in older people and those with underlying health conditions. It was initially identified in China in 2019 and became a pandemic in 2020. COVID-19 is also known as SARS-CoV-2 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020).

Pre-COVID. Pre-COVID is defined in this study as the time period before schools were closed in March 2020 due to the threat of the coronavirus spreading.

Post-COVID. Post-COVID is defined in this study as the time period after schools closed in March 2020 due to the threat of the coronavirus spreading, and the time period continues throughout the 2020-2021 school year.

Summary

Assistant principals play a vital role in students’ academic growth through their work with teachers but have many more responsibilities besides instructional leaders. This study

explored assistant principals' role as instructional leaders and addressed challenges that keep assistant principals from serving as instructional leaders. This study also explored if assistant principals' perceptions of their role and as instructional leaders align with theory and what preparation assistant principals need to continue to lead campus instruction and be on the frontline of decision-making. Lastly, this study explored how assistant principals' role as instructional leaders transitioned during the coronavirus pandemic. The next chapter will examine the relevant literature on instructional leadership, assistant principals' role, and how organizations evolve through the chaos.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Assistant principals are expected to be influential instructional leaders. However, they may not always feel they are doing the critical work but are charged with what some may consider mundane, punitive tasks such as discipline, custodial duties, and other administrative work (Glanz, 2004; Hayes & Burkett, 2020; Morgan, 2018). While juggling discipline, teacher evaluations, student services meetings, among many other things, assistant principals often feel defeated and not valued in their work (Armstrong, 2009; Morgan, 2018). To better understand the role of assistant principals as instructional leaders, we first need to understand the context of how instructional leadership has evolved in education and how assistant principals traditionally have been prepared for their roles. In what follows, I explore the literature around instructional leadership, the role of the assistant principal, and chaos theory.

Instructional Leadership

Instructional leadership is more than visiting classrooms and what happens within the classroom walls (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Zuckerman et al., 2020). Several instructional leadership models include both leadership and managerial components (Hallinger, 2003; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Zuckerman et al., 2020). With instructional leadership being the main focus for influential school leaders, research shows that assistant principals often feel underprepared for the position, especially since most programs prepare for the principal position (Kwan, 2009; Morgan, 2018). Although there are similarities between the assistant principal and the principal, the assistant principal position operates much differently from the principal, leaving some/many assistant principals feeling lost and incompetent in their role as instructional leaders (Armstrong, 2009; Barnett et al., 2012; Hausman et al., 2002; Kwan, 2009; Morgan,

2018). As instructional leadership continues to be a significant component of assistant principal evaluations, there is a need to understand better how instructional leadership is enacted in a school setting. Further, schools are not isolated and protected from larger societal disruptions, so crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic can strain and reshape understandings of the roles enacted by school personnel, including assistant principals. To this end, we need to understand how organizations create change and respond to chaos, especially during this unprecedented time.

In what follows, I examine the literature pertinent to these challenges. I first explore the development of instructional leadership as a whole and then the practice of instructional leadership, which guides school leaders before turning to assistant principals' roles.

History of Instructional Leadership

The emphasis on instructional leadership has been prominent for many decades, but a definition has been somewhat elusive (Brazer & Bauer, 2013; Hallinger & Murphy, 2013; Searby et al., 2017). Instructional leadership has grown into one of the most powerful and relevant school leadership practices and is closely tied to teaching and learning (Brazer & Bauer, 2013; Bush, 2015; Hallinger & Murphy, 2013; Hallinger et al., 2020). Educational practices have adapted as schools developed throughout the years, but the focus on instructional leadership has remained steady even as schools have changed (Hallinger, 2015).

Instructional leadership originally evolved around practice-based research in the 1960s and 1970s (Hallinger & Murphy, 2013). A body of research focused on effective school principals asserted that “effective” principals shared common characteristics, including an emphasis on the improvement of instructional practices, articulation of clear school goals, supervision of teaching through the assessment of teaching and feedback, and establishing goals

for students (Bridges, 1967; Chase & Guba, 1955; Edmonds, 1979; Gold & Herald, 1968; Gumus et al., 2018; Searby et al., 2017). As effective leadership studies continued to gain momentum in the research world, instructional leadership became one of the most commonly studied educational leadership areas (Gumus et al., 2018; Searby et al., 2017). With more research, instructional leadership became more clearly defined (Gumus et al., 2018; Searby et al., 2017).

During the 1980s, educational leadership research centered around the effective schools' movement, which provided opportunities for instructional leadership to surface (Hallinger & Murphy, 2013). According to the effective schools' literature, a leader who prioritized teaching and learning were described by researchers as effective and seen as a strong instructional leader (Gumus et al., 2018, p. 29; Hallinger & Murphy, 2013; Lemahieu et al., 1997). While instructional leadership was emerging as an area of focus, many scholars were skeptical of the value of instructional leadership in schools. The instructional leadership model shifted from a focus on management to a model centered on leadership (Hallinger et al., 2020). For example, Stanford University professor and former school superintendent Larry Cuban questioned whether principals would ever be able to push aside their political and managerial roles and focus on instructional leadership (Cuban, 1988; Hallinger et al., 2020). Even with skepticism, instructional leadership models continued to develop (Hallinger & Murphy, 2013). As a focus on instructional leadership continued to grow, more and more research was published around the world. The first systematic review of instructional leadership research was published in 1982 (i.e., Bossert et al., 1982). Bossert et al. (1982) synthesized research, which examined principals as instructional leaders, and school organizations, including teaching and learning. Bossert et al. (1982) found

that principals can influence the school's climate and instructional organization, and their role is a crucial element to the school's social and instructional environment.

Even with instructional leadership as the focus of international research, it was not until 1996 that researchers began taking an in-depth look into the relationship between principal leadership and student achievement (Hallinger et al., 1996a; Hallinger et al., 2020). This was the development of a positive relationship between student success and instructional leadership (Hallinger et al., 1996a, 1996b; Hallinger et al., 2020). Hallinger and Heck (1996a, 1996b) found that the instructional leadership model was the most frequently studied education model over the past twenty-five years (Hallinger, 2005).

Fast-forward to the twenty-first century, instructional leadership is still prevalent, but now it is a global educational leadership practice (Hallinger et al., 2020). According to Hallinger et al. (2020), schools worldwide are integrating models of instructional leadership and focusing on student achievement to assess educational effectiveness. Hallinger's (2005) research suggested a stronger emphasis on instructional leadership in the profession than existed in the previous two decades (Hallinger, 2000; 2003; Southworth, 2002). Instructional leadership was now prominent in the United States and the United Kingdom, Europe, Asia, Africa, and Latin America (Hallinger et al., 2020). With instructional leadership moving worldwide, the amount of research grew dramatically, improving existing instructional leadership models (Brazer & Bauer, 2013).

During the 2000s, researchers continued to make further connections between instructional leadership and student achievement (Gumus et al., 2018; Hallinger et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 2008; Scheerens, 2012; Witziers et al., 2003), along with student learning (Hallinger et al., 2020; Leithwood et al., 2008; Louis et al., 2010). With the growth of

instructional leadership research, there has been a shift in terms used, including ‘leadership for learning’ and ‘shared leadership,’ but all terms are centered on the connection between school leadership and student achievement (Brazer & Bauer, 2013; Bush, 2015; VanTuyle, 2018).

Instructional Leadership Defined

As instructional leadership developed throughout the years, how instructional leadership is defined has also evolved (Brazer & Bauer, 2013; Hallinger & Murphy, 2013). In the initial stage of instructional leadership in the 1960s and 1970s, the focus was around teacher feedback and classroom visits by the principal alone (Marzano et al., 2011). In the early 1980s, instructional leadership branched out. It was defined by the activities the principal would delegate to others, including assistant principals, to promote student learning, such as classroom visits and student activities (Celikten, 2001; Marshall & Hooley, 2006). During this time, research on instructional leadership was often centered around poor-performing schools and described instructional leaders as strong, directive leaders capable of successfully turning around underperforming schools. (Bamburg & Andrews, 1990; Bossert et al., 1982; Edmonds, 1979; Hallinger, 2005; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985a, 1985b, 1986).

In the 1990s, instructional leaders were portrayed as culture leaders who fostered high expectations and standards for students and teachers (Barth, 1990; Bossert et al., 1982; Mortimore, 1993; Glasman, 1984; Hallinger, 2005; Hallinger et al., 1996; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985a, 1985b, 1986; Heck et al., 1990; Purkey & Smith, 1983). During this time frame, instructional leadership practices transitioned not only to include classroom visits and teacher feedback but also the practice of building a vision and school culture to increase student engagement and achievement. Instructional leaders were characterized as goal-oriented, defining

a clear direction for the school and motivating others towards goal achievement (Hallinger, 2005).

Hallinger and Murphy (1985) developed a conceptual definition of instructional leadership, which has since been used in over 500 empirical studies (Hallinger & Wang, 2015; Hallinger et al., 2020). Within this definition, instructional leadership is defined as “school leadership intended to influence school and classroom teaching and learning processes to improve learning for all students” (Hallinger et al., 2020, p. 1632). As schools continued to reform, the definition of instructional leadership was refined, focusing and identifying common characteristics around improving student achievement by improving the climate and culture, supporting teachers and students, and setting a vision of success (Searby et al., 2017).

Within the past two decades, the definition of instructional leadership has been molded and shaped by a multitude of studies. Marzano et al. (2001) produced a meta-analysis of 70 empirical studies on instructional leadership to identify critical characteristics of influential school leaders who focused on student learning (Hallinger & Murphy; 1985a; Marzano, 2001; Taylor Backor & Gordon, 2015). In this study, there were three specific principal behaviors identified regarding student achievement and school leadership:

- Systematically and fairly recognizing and celebrating the accomplishments of students
- Systematically and fairly recognizing and celebrating the accomplishments of teachers
- Systematically and fairly recognizing the failures of the school as a whole (Marzano et al., 2001, p. 44).

Neumerski's (2013) conception of instructional leadership included leaders visibly observing classrooms and providing feedback to teachers, inspiring others with a shared vision, serving as a strong disciplinarian, specializing in curriculum, evaluating student achievement, and building school culture while setting high expectations. Within this definition, the initial instructional leadership concept merges, including classroom feedback, with the more modern-day instructional leadership definition, including organizational leadership.

As the concept of instructional leadership evolved, the characteristics used to define instructional leadership built on each other as researchers would take concepts and models and develop them further. The current definition of instructional leadership is a blend of models and focuses on how campus administrators influence the school's vision, motivate staff, and improve teaching and learning (Brazer & Bauer, 2013; Hallinger & Murphy, 2013; Taylor Backor & Gordon, 2015). This current definition includes how a positive learning environment is created for students, how student achievement expectations are embedded into the school structures and curriculum, what strategies are embedded to change the school culture over time, and what professional learning is provided to sustain change (Hallinger & Murphy, 2013). As the definition of instructional leadership has evolved, it is imperative to take note of instructional leadership through both the traditional and non-traditional lenses.

Traditional Instructional Leadership

The instructional leader's role is becoming more and more the expectation of school leaders (Allen & Weaver, 2014; Horng & Loeb, 2010; Oliver, 2005). According to Allen and Weaver (2014), "Research indicates that school leadership is fundamental in influencing school effectiveness and that principals who focus on teaching and learning greatly influence student performance" (p. 16). Due to accountability standards and campus leaders being held responsible

for student performance, the emphasis on instructional leadership has increased, but there is often not a specific explanation of what that may look like while in the role (Allen & Weaver, 2014; Horng & Loeb, 2010; Oliver, 2005).

While most principal preparation programs agree on the importance of preparing candidates to be successful instructional leaders (Oliver, 2005), there is no common understanding of precisely what instructional leadership looks like on a day-to-day basis for assistant principals (Horng & Loeb, 2010). Originally, instructional leadership consisted exclusively of classroom observations and improving teaching and learning directly through feedback (Brazer & Bauer, 2013; Horng & Loeb, 2010). This traditional view of instructional leadership depicts campus administrators in classrooms and working closely with teachers to better their craft. This depiction would include campus leaders mentoring their teaching staff by observing classrooms and providing feedback (Horng & Loeb, 2010). Classroom observations and teacher feedback are a priority within the traditional view of instructional leadership. However, campus leaders are also responsible for developing and delivering professional development based on their teachers' needs and creating a positive culture for student learning (Lutrick & Szabo, 2012). Within this traditional view of instructional leadership, administrators work to improve student learning through the lens of classroom instruction and teacher development.

Non-traditional Instructional Leadership

Although instructional leadership is often perceived as the 1980s portrayal where principals are in classrooms, observing classroom instruction, few studies have found this to be an accurate image of what authentic instructional leadership entails (Hallinger, 2005). Not only is it an inaccurate representation of instructional leadership, but there is also an absence of

empirical evidence suggesting that principals spend more time in the classroom observing instruction than they did when instructional leadership was first introduced (Hallinger, 2005; Hallinger & Heck, 1996a, 1996b). Even with this absence of evidence, there is evidence that time spent observing classrooms at the high school level has a negative association with student growth because walkthroughs are not often used as an intervention for school improvement (Grissom et al., 2013).

Due to instructional leadership often being viewed in the traditional setting as discussed previously, it is essential also to view instructional leadership in a non-traditional setting, emphasizing the importance of organizational management for improvement in student achievement (Brazer & Bauer, 2013; Gurley et al., 2015; Hallinger, 2005; Horng & Loeb, 2010; Searby et al., 2017). The modern-day instructional leadership models all include aspects of organizational management.

Effective instructional leadership includes aligning strategies and activities to student achievement and creating a school climate and culture that invites learning (Brazer & Bauer, 2013; Hallinger, 2005). When preparing future leaders for the non-traditional view of instructional leadership, there must be a focus on organizational management, such as hiring and retaining teachers and providing opportunities to build capacity and grow teachers (Brazer & Bauer, 2013; Horng & Loeb, 2010). Louis et al. (2010) conducted an extensive, six-year multi-state study of school leadership and found that school leaders primarily influence teachers' motivation and working conditions to affect student learning. In a study by Grissom et al. (2021), the finding held true that school leadership is the second most important factor to student achievement, behind teacher influence. With that being said, school administrators have the

ability to influence teachers through school culture, expectations, and hiring, allowing for a larger effect on campus and with students.

Although classroom support is necessary, school leaders assessing or evaluating teachers' knowledge and skills have less effect on student learning; therefore, the school leaders should be cautious about having a too-narrow focus on classroom instruction (Louis et al., 2010). Hallinger (2005) also supports the idea that instructional leadership is connected closely with the school's culture and by modeling rather than the direct supervision and evaluation of teaching.

Organizational management includes building a vision for the campus and setting the campus mission and goals around student learning (Barth, 1990; Brazer & Bauer, 2013; Dwyer, 1985; Hallinger, 2005; Hallinger & Heck, 1996a, 1996b; Leitner, 1994; Southworth, 2002). Within a vision, instructional leaders have the opportunity to create a working environment that is desirable for both students and teachers (Celikten, 2001). Although some do not see this as directly impacting student learning, it is one of the essential organizational frameworks which guides the campus leader in creating a positive and welcoming culture to increase student achievement (Barth, 1990; Brazer & Bauer, 2013; Dwyer, 1985; Hallinger, 2005; Hallinger & Heck, 1996a, 1996b; Leitner, 1994; Southworth, 2002). Along with setting a clear vision for the campus, instructional leaders create safe learning environments for students and teachers while motivating teachers, which helps retain quality teachers (Mendels, 2012). In order to help retain quality teachers and support teachers professionally, administrators must create an environment around trust, where teachers feel safe and have the autonomy to make decisions that are best for students (Tschannen-Moran, 2009). Broadening instructional leadership's scope to include organizational management only better prepares future leaders because without managerial

leadership that focuses on systems and behaviors, schools cannot effectively facilitate student learning (Brazer & Bauer, 2013; Gumus et al., 2018; Hallinger, 2005).

Instructional Leadership Models

As instructional leadership has evolved and become more clearly defined, researchers have developed models to support instructional leaders' transition into effective instructional leaders. Hallinger (2005) reviewed instructional leadership models and literature from the past twenty-five years and compiled a comprehensive instructional leadership framework which included the following components:

- Creating a shared sense of purpose in the school, including clear goals focused on student learning;
- Fostering the continuous improvement of the school through cyclical school development planning that involves a wide range of stakeholders;
- Developing a climate of high expectations and a school culture aimed at innovation and improvement of teaching and learning;
- Coordinating the curriculum and monitoring student learning outcomes;
- Shaping the reward structure of the school to reflect the school's mission;
- Organizing and monitoring a wide range of activities aimed at the continuous development of staff; and
- Being a visible presence in the school, modeling the desired values of the school's culture (p. 233).

Within this model, the act of visiting classrooms is not explicitly included but can be inferred within several given domains. Even though this model is not solely focused on classroom

instruction, several elements demonstrate campus leaders' role in creating an environment that supports teachers and students (Hallinger, 2005).

Several other instructional leadership models include aspects of organizational management but may be organized differently. According to Hallinger (2005), Hallinger and Murphy's (1985a) model of instructional leadership has been the most frequently used in empirical investigations (Gumus et al., 2018; Hallinger et al., 1996a). This particular model focuses on three dimensions for the role of the principal as an instructional leader: defining the school's mission, managing the instructional program, and promoting a positive school learning climate (Hallinger, 2001; Hallinger, 2005; Hallinger et al., 1985a; Searby et al., 2017; VanTuyle, 2018). The first dimension defines the school's mission while framing and communicating school goals (Hallinger et al., 1985a). When instructional leaders provide a clear vision, all stakeholders work towards a common goal. The second dimension is managing the instructional program by working with teachers in curriculum, instruction, and assessment (Hallinger et al., 1985a). This includes visiting classrooms, providing resources and professional development, and facilitating PLCs. Lastly, the third dimension promotes a positive school learning climate by protecting instructional time, promoting professional development, maintaining high visibility, providing incentives for teachers, enforcing academic standards, and providing student incentives (Hallinger et al., 1985a). This dimension includes managing student discipline to help provide structure and a positive environment in the classroom. As an instructional leader, it also means facilitating ARDs and 504 meetings to provide students with the necessary accommodations for success.

Since Hallinger and Murphy's 1985 model, a few other models have been described based on emerging research. Stronge, Richard, and Catano (2008) outlined an instructional

leadership model that includes five elements: building and sustaining a school vision, sharing leadership, leading a learning community, using data to make instructional decisions, and monitoring curriculum and instruction. Another more recent instructional leadership model is described by Louis et al. (2010). Their study described effective instructional leaders within two categories: instructional climate and instructional actions (Louis et al., 2010; Searby et al., 2017). Within the instructional climate, principals set the school culture to support professional learning, and within instructional actions, principals directly interact with teachers to promote growth (Searby et al., 2017). This model by Louis et al. (2010) developed into an expanded model by Leithwood and Louis (2011), which focused on four core practices: setting directions, developing people, focusing on learning, and improving the instructional program (Searby et al., 2017). Although these models slightly differ, they are centered around student success by supporting teachers and school culture.

One of the most recent models, the Wallace Foundation (2013) model, provides domains in which effective leaders actively engage in:

- Shaping a vision of academic success for all students, one based on high standards;
- Creating a climate hospitable to education so that safety, a cooperative spirit, and other foundation of fruitful interaction prevail;
- Cultivating leadership in others so that teachers and other adults assume their part in realizing the school vision;
- Improving instruction to enable teachers to teach at their best and students to learn at their utmost; and
- Managing people, data, and processes to foster school improvement (p. 6).

The most current model by Grissom et al. (2021) describes instructional leadership behavior using the following four categories:

- Engaging in instructionally focused interactions with teachers;
- Building a productive school climate;
- Facilitating productive collaboration and professional learning communities; and
- Managing personnel and resources strategically (p. 58).

Each model previously described includes similar concepts, including sharing a vision and developing a culture that supports teachers and students in the classroom (Mendels, 2012; Searby et al., 2017; Wallace Foundation, 2013). These models provide standards around building a vision that supports all students (Leithwood & Louis, 2011; Stronge et al., 2008; Wallace Foundation, 2013), providing professional development for all stakeholders around equity (Leithwood & Louis, 2011; Stronge et al., 2008; Wallace Foundation, 2013), supporting professional learning communities (Leithwood & Louis, 2011; Stronge et al., 2008; Wallace Foundation, 2013), and using data and classroom instruction to ensure all students are successful (Leithwood & Louis, 2011; Stronge et al., 2008; Wallace Foundation, 2013). Instructional leadership is centered around well-versed and trained leaders to provide students and teachers with the best opportunities (Celikten, 2001; Mendels, 2012). These models do not include specific assistant principal duties and responsibilities, but expectations for campus instructional leaders are outlined clearly. The model designs lay the foundation for the campus, and the responsibilities associated with the domains are provided to help ensure everyone is working towards a unified goal.

Principals as Instructional Leaders

The principalship is frequently the focus of instructional leadership research; assistant principals as instructional leaders are an infrequent focus (Celikten, 2001; Searby et al., 2017; VanTuyle, 2018). With assistant principals often desiring to move up the principal pipeline, there are benefits to understanding instructional leaders' roles from the principal perspective.

Principals often find themselves working towards the expectations of serving as the prominent campus instructional leader, carrying the burden of leading a school on their own (Barth, 1990; Hallinger, 2005). With education continually changing, along with the expectations of administrators, the days of serving as the lone instructional leader have ended, and the principal is responsible for growing instructional leadership capacity within their team and has ownership of how instructional leadership looks on their campus (Celikten, 2001; Hallinger, 2005).

During the 1980s, there was mainly reference to instructional leadership from the principal perspective but not the assistant principal perspective (Celikten, 2001; Hallinger, 2005; Searby et al., 2017). Although there is evidence that ties school effectiveness and student achievement to school principals, this does not entail the job of the principal solely, but the campus administrative team as a whole (Hallinger, 2005; Hallinger & Murphy, 2013; Mendels, 2012; Searby et al., 2017; VanTuyle, 2018). The research does indicate that the principal's role in shaping the school's mission and vision and ensuring that school systems align is one of the most critical aspects of the job, yet it is beyond the capacity of one person to tackle alone (Bamburg & Andrews, 1990; Brazer & Bauer, 2013; Celikten, 2001; Goldring & Pasternak, 1994; Glasman, 1984; Hallinger, 2005; Hallinger et al., 1996; Hallinger & Heck, 1996a, 1996b, 2002; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985b; Heck et al., 1990; Marks & Printy, 2003; Searby et al., 2017). When reflecting on instructional leadership models, the literature suggests that it is the

principal's responsibility to set the vision for all instructional leaders on campus (Neumerski, 2013; Uddin et al., 2020; Zuckerman et al., 2020). The assistant principal's responsibility is to live out the instructional leadership vision with the campus principal's guidance and support (Gurley et al., 2013; Hayes & Burkett, 2020; Uddin et al., 2020).

While the role of instructional leader may not differ much between the principal and the assistant principal, how different campus leaders enact instructional leadership may vary. The assistant principal's role as an instructional leader is dependent on the principal's view of how assistant principals meet the instructional needs of the campus (Mendels, 2012). The principal has the authority to decide what tasks are delegated to the assistant principals and is responsible for designing the assistant principal's role for their campus (Celikten, 2001). For example, the principal can delegate discipline and attendance as the main tasks to an assistant principal or make instructional leadership the focus and provide other systems to support discipline and attendance.

Role of Assistant Principals

The Evolution of the Position

Principals first hired an assistant to help with task overload during the 1800s as student enrollment increased. As the number of responsibilities placed on the principal grew, the position became a more formal position in the United States in the 1930s and was named "assistant principal" (Gurley et al., 2015; VanTuyle, 2018). The assistant principal position was initially described as a managerial position. Although the position of assistant principals became common in schools, the position itself did not gain public attention from researchers until the 1970s.

The role itself has not changed significantly in the last 25 years (Celikten, 2001; Glanz, 1994; Gurley et al., 2015; Searby et al., 2017; VanTuyle, 2018). Although the research focused

on assistant principals has increased, the assistant principal's role is still understudied compared to the principals' role (Barnett et al., 2012; Gurley et al., 2015; Kaplan & Owings, 1999; Oleszewski et al., 2012). Assistant principals commonly describe their duties as including responsibilities related to discipline (Calabrese, 1991; Glanz, 1994; Gurley et al., 2015; Oleszewski et al., 2012; Searby et al., 2017), attendance (Glanz, 1994; Oleszewski et al., 2012), student activities (Gurley et al., 2015; Searby et al., 2017), master schedules (Oleszewski et al., 2012), building operations (Calabrese, 1991; Gurley et al., 2015; Oleszewski et al., 2012; Searby et al., 2017), curriculum (Glanz, 1994; Oleszewski et al., 2012), and reports (Searby et al., 2017), with the majority of time dedicated to student management issues and personnel management (Calabrese, 1991; Gurley et al., 2015; Oleszewski et al., 2012; Searby et al., 2017).

In 1992, Catherine Marshall wrote the first book focused on the assistant principal's role and assistant principals' influence on instructional leadership and academic achievement (Allen & Weaver, 2014). Assistant principals reported that the duties they spent the most time responding to were discipline, campus safety, student activities, building maintenance, teacher evaluations, ARD and 504 meetings, textbooks, and assessments (Calabrese, 1991; Celikten, 2001; Marshall and Hooley, 2006; Oleszewski et al., 2012). According to Hausman et al. (2002), discipline was rated as the most time-consuming duty, with attendance being the second most time-consuming function of the assistant principal position. Marshall (1992) wrote about the need for "training and support to enable them to manage the tasks and responsibilities faced in the position such as discipline, scheduling, and extracurricular activities. But beyond this, assistant principals need to be prepared to face the fundamental dilemmas in administration" (p. 89). Along with needing professional development for the day-to-day functions, assistant

principals have also voiced their struggle with the human interaction woven into all aspects of the job (Barnett et al., 2012).

The assistant principalship is now considered the entry-level position for school administration and the start of the principal pipeline (Glanz, 1994; Gurley et al., 2015; Oleszewski et al., 2012; Searby et al., 2017). The assistant principal job often does not have a clear job description, leaving the role defined by the campus principal (Celikten, 2001). Even with a lack of job description, many assistant principals see themselves as campus problem solvers (Barnett et al., 2012; Marshall & Hooley, 2006). Assistant principals find themselves responsible for whatever tasks and duties might be handed to them by their principal, often leading to stress and burnout (Barnett et al., 2012; Celikten, 2001; Oleszewski et al., 2012).

With the continued push for instructional leadership, assistant principals are doing all of the managerial tasks they have historically handled (Celikten, 2001). However, they are also expected to actively participate in PLCs, develop and coach teachers, and lead student support systems, such as Response to Intervention (RtI) (Searby et al., 2017). With tasks added on, little to no tasks have been removed from the scope of the assistant principal position, leaving those in the position feeling like it is not changing but just expanding, causing it to become an increasingly complicated job (Gurley et al., 2015). With added responsibilities, assistant principals find it even harder to juggle and accomplish all the assigned duties.

Principal Preparation Programs and Professional Development

Professional development for assistant principals is becoming an even higher priority as the turnover of administrators increases and as they are held more responsible for the learning outcomes of the school (Gurley et al., 2015; Marshall, 2004; Searby et al., 2017). Although it is unreasonable to expect principals to be experts on everything, especially while education quickly

changes, it is important that assistant principals feel confident and prepared to lead schools (Hallinger & Murphy, 2013; Oleszewski et al., 2012).

The assistant principalship is often the entry-level position for school administration, but principal preparation programs often focus on the principal's role (Oleszewski et al., 2012; Searby et al., 2017). The lack of differentiation between the preparation for assistant principals and principals highlights a concern. The literature talks of instructional leadership as a monolith, as if it looks the same in an assistant principal role as it does in a principal role (Oleszewski et al., 2012; Searby et al., 2017). Although instructional leaders in any position have the same goal to improve instruction and student achievement, how a teacher leader or department chair enacts instructional leadership may look very different than how a principal or assistant principal enacts instructional leadership while juggling other responsibilities (Allen & Weaver, 2014; Searby et al., 2017). As the expectation for assistant principals to grow as instructional leaders continues, there is a need for more research to determine how campus administrators define instructional leadership, how assistant principals experience instructional leadership in reality, and what support is needed to allow assistant principals to follow through with this expectation and effectively lead a campus through the lens of instructional leadership (Searby et al., 2017).

When looking at the challenges and the needs of assistant principals, it is crucial to examine the preparation provided to aspiring assistant principals and the professional development provided to current campus administrators. When reviewing the professional development of current and aspiring assistant principals, there are consistent reports from assistant principals of not being fully prepared to be successful in the role based on their professional training (Allen & Weaver, 2014; Barnett et al., 2012; Brazer & Bauer, 2013; Gurley et al., 2015; Searby et al., 2017; Taylor Backor & Gordon, 2015). According to Hernandez and

Roberts (2012), “In a 2003 survey, 67% of the principals revealed that leadership training in schools of education did not prepare them for their role as instructional leaders. Again in 2007, 69% of the principals shared the same sentiment” (p. 4). Due to this lack of preparation for assistant principals, campus principals find themselves training assistant principals on the job (Louis et al., 2010). Assistant principals continue to seek meaningful and relevant professional development but are often not awarded the same opportunities for professional growth given to principals and teachers (Allen & Weaver, 2014). As principal preparation programs continue to reform due to schools’ needs, the designers of these programs must rethink the definition of instructional leadership and provide opportunities and the skills for future leaders to grow in both traditional and non-traditional ways (Brazer & Bauer, 2013). With assistant principals searching for continued professional growth opportunities, many seek principals and other district leaders as a mentor (Barnett et al., 2017).

Stress, Turnover, and Barriers to Instructional Leadership

The assistant principal’s responsibilities have led to stress and burnout as the job brings more challenges and complexities due to growing mandates and school reform (Searby et al., 2017). With little change or clarity to the job description over the past several decades, assistant principals continue to find themselves focused on what they consider managerial tasks and less involved in instructional leadership, often leading to job dissatisfaction (Celikten, 2001; Gurley et al., 2015; Hallinger & Murphy, 2013; Oleszewski et al., 2012; Searby et al., 2017; VanTuyle, 2018). Cornelius and Cornelius (2014) found:

60% of educators believe principals are paid too little for the amount of work involved.

Some 32% found the job too stressful. Twenty-seven percent said the job required too

much time. Difficulty in satisfying parents bothered 14%, and 13% said societal problems distract from teaching. (pp. 1-2)

Marshall (2004) includes the narrow salary gaps between teachers and administrators and the lack of support and increased accountability as factors leading to job dissatisfaction. Cornelius and Cornelius (2014) accurately summed up the load of assistant principals by saying:

School principals in the new millennium will add to their list of responsibilities the added duties of finding solutions to 22nd-century challenges. These challenges include but are not limited to keeping students motivated and safe in a school environment that is increasingly apathetic and nonviolent. (p. 3)

As the assistant principal's job continues to become more complex with increases in school violence and students' social-emotional needs, recruiting educators is becoming more difficult (Gajda & Militello, 2008). Not only do assistant principals struggle with managing the job's stress, but they also often find themselves isolated from their former peers, withdrawing from their support group (Searby et al., 2017).

To add stress, assistant principals struggle with prioritizing the daily tasks of the position due to tensions involved in determining which tasks are more urgent than others and thus should take priority (Hallinger & Murphy, 2013). Even where assistant principals want to support classroom instruction, they may feel pressure to complete the managerial tasks first, such as managing discipline prior to visiting classrooms (Barnett et al., 2012; Hallinger & Murphy, 2013). Assistant principals are always deciding which task is a priority and which task can be left undone. Assistant principals must be provided in-depth training and be fully prepared for the position, as this is often an entry-level position for most administrative careers (Hausman et al., 2002; Marshall & Hooley, 2006; Oleszewski et al., 2012). Not only are assistant principals

balancing multiple tasks and responsibilities, but they are also often trying to learn more about handling specific situations that they were not prepared to handle.

Although student discipline, staff development, curriculum development, community relations, and all other tasks are not the first thoughts when considering the work of an instructional leader, these tasks contribute to the vision and mission of the campus and should be recognized as instructional leadership (Calabrese, 1991; Searby et al., 2017). Not only do these tasks increase school effectiveness, but there is also an increase in research that supports the idea that the tasks and responsibilities of assistant principals are mirroring the complexity of the principalship more and more (Harris et al., 2004; Hartzell, 1995; Searby et al., 2017).

Although these tasks are essential and increase school effectiveness, assistant principals do not always feel these responsibilities are valued regarding student achievement. As assistant principals continue to develop while in the role, they find themselves balancing the job's unrelenting stress and trying to adapt their educational leadership preparation into real-world situations (Barnett et al., 2012; Curry, 2009). With assistant principals often quickly conforming to the pressure of the role of assistant principal, they face role conflict, leading them to feel undervalued for their work and unsatisfied with the reality of the position (Glanz, 1994).

Assistant Principal Evaluations

Since assistant principal preparation programs often prepare for the principalship and most certifications for administrators are the same for the principal and assistant principals, the evaluation used to assess assistant principals' success mirrors that of the principal (Gurley et al., 2015; Texas Education Agency, 2020). Both principal and assistant principal evaluations tend to have a component that focuses on instructional leadership (Catano & Stronge, 2006; Kimball et al., 2015).

In 2001, when No Child Left Behind was introduced, there was a push for evaluating principals through an instructional leadership lens (Gurley et al., 2015). The emphasis on principals and assistant principals as instructional leaders is evident in the evaluation standards adapted to include best instructional leadership practices (Brazer & Bauer, 2013; Searby et al., 2017). The Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium Standards (ISLLC) standards were revised in 2008 to include verbiage tied to an education leader instead of an administrator (Educational Leadership Policy Standards, 2008; Searby et al., 2017). In 2015, the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) released new professional standards that emphasized effective instructional leadership (Searby et al., 2017). Even with the revision of professional standards and increased expectations around instructional leadership, school administrators found themselves moving further away from focusing on instruction and more towards managerial tasks (Gosnell-Lamb et al., 2013).

Conceptual Framework

My approach to this study draws on a conceptual framework grounded in the Instructional Leadership Framework posited by Wallace Foundation (2013) and chaos and complexity theory (Morgan, 2006). The instructional leadership component provides a lens through which to view the assistant principal role, while complexity and chaos theory provides a lens for exploring organizational change for assistant principals through the COVID-19 pandemic. In this study, I draw on my own framework to examine the assistant principal's role as an instructional leader, pre- and post-COVID.

Instructional Leadership

The Wallace Foundation (2013) framework is composed of five domains, including leadership and management responsibilities. The five domains of this model are:

- Shaping a vision of academic success for all students, one based on high standards;
- Creating a climate hospitable to education so that safety, a cooperative spirit, and other foundation of fruitful interaction prevail;
- Cultivating leadership in others so that teachers and other adults assume their part in realizing the school vision;
- Improving instruction to enable teachers to teach at their best and students to learn at their utmost; and
- Managing people, data, and processes to foster school improvement (Wallace Foundation, 2013, p. 6).

This model provides broad enough domains to allow flexibility in interpretation and inclusive of most assistant principal responsibilities. The effective instructional leader works towards the school vision within and outside the classroom and advocates for students' and teachers' needs. The definition of instructional leadership is not defined by specific tasks yet by school improvement outcomes.

Knowing that assistant principals' role as instructional leaders needs continuous attention, this study will consider the struggles assistant principals have faced within the position. This conceptual framework works under the assumption that assistant principals receive minimal professional development opportunities tied directly to assistant principals' roles and are often prepared for the principal role. Assistant principals often struggle to balance all their responsibilities while striving to be effective instructional leaders. This study will explore if there is a misalignment between what assistant principals perceive as instructional leadership duties and the actual day-to-day responsibilities of the position.

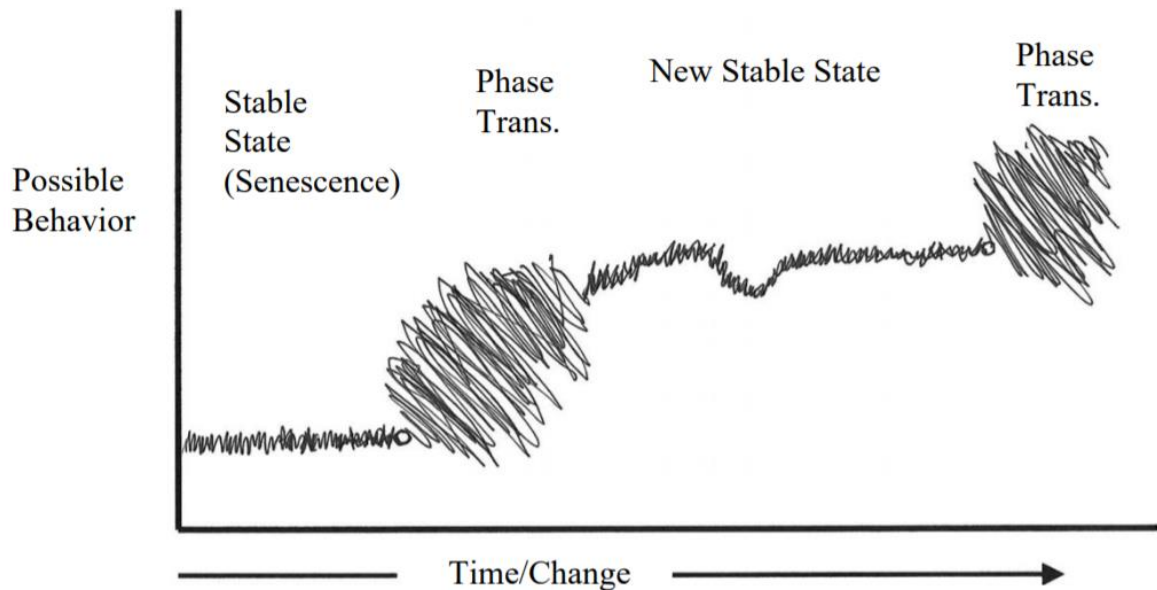
Chaos and Complexity Theory

As assistant principals potentially (re)define instructional leadership during COVID-19, chaos and complexity theory (e.g., Morgan, 2006) will provide a lens to analyze organizational change during a crisis. Organizations are presented with challenges and must respond when there is a change in the environment (Morgan, 2006).

Chaos and complexity theory suggest that organizations seek equilibrium when there is change, but the organization balances attractors (Morgan, 2006). “Attractors” are properties of the organization which focus attention, priorities, and behaviors. When new attractors are thrown into the current system, there is a chaotic period where the system is in a complex state (Morgan, 2006).

Figure 1

Complexity Theory and the “New Normal”



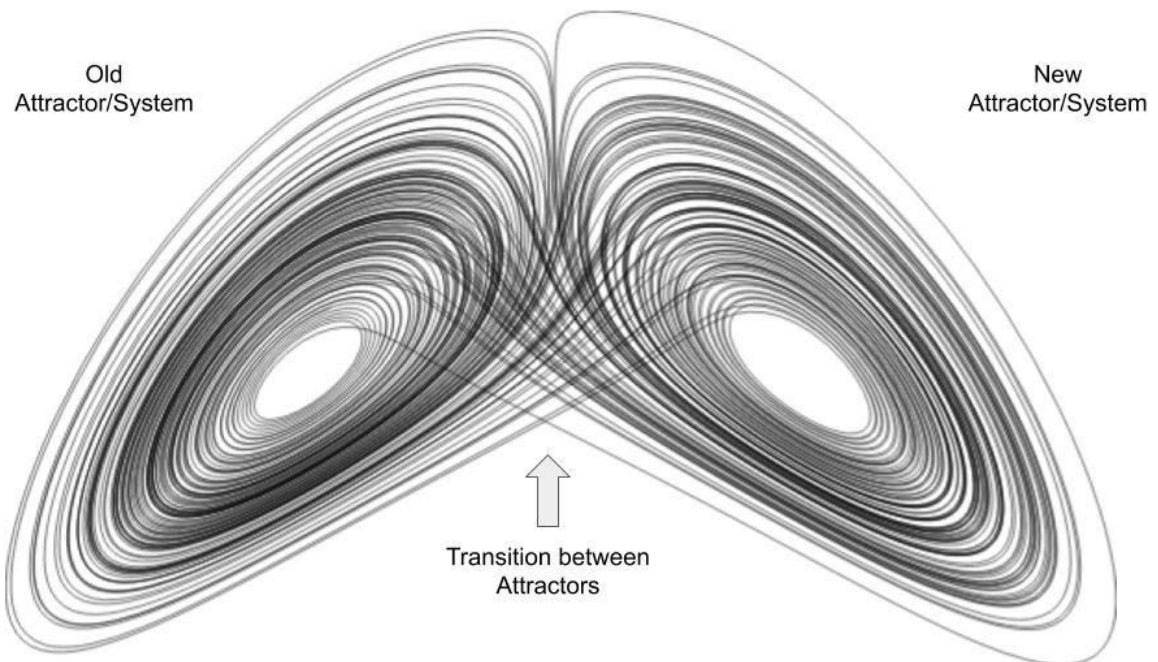
Note. Illustration from Baskin, K. (2007). Ever the twain shall meet. *Chinese Management Studies* 1(1), 57-68.

Figure 1 helps demonstrate organizational change over time as organizations search for their new normal. The image illustrates times when organizational behavior is stable, punctuated by other times when organizational behavior is chaotic and tries to reach stability.

When organizations experience a disruption in the system, achieving a new state of equilibrium does not always entail returning to the systems in place prior to the disruption. However, organizational change may result in one of three things: adapting the old system to fit the new system's needs, merging the old and the new systems, or changing the system entirely (Morgan, 2006). To reach equilibrium, the organization will create attractors and determine which attractors seek more attention; therefore, creating change (Morgan, 2006).

Figure 2

"The Lorenz Attractor" by Edward Lorenz



Note. Illustration from Morgan, G. (2006). *Images of organization*. (Updated edition), 253.

During a time of chaos, random disturbances can create unpredictable events and relationships that may eventually lead to novel patterns of change being created (Morgan, 2006). Even though systems go through periods of chaos, order always emerges, and a new system (organized around some anchoring force) is a natural outcome (Morgan, 2006). Figure 2 is Edward Lorenz's image of attractors, demonstrating the transition from old to new attractors (Morgan, 2006).

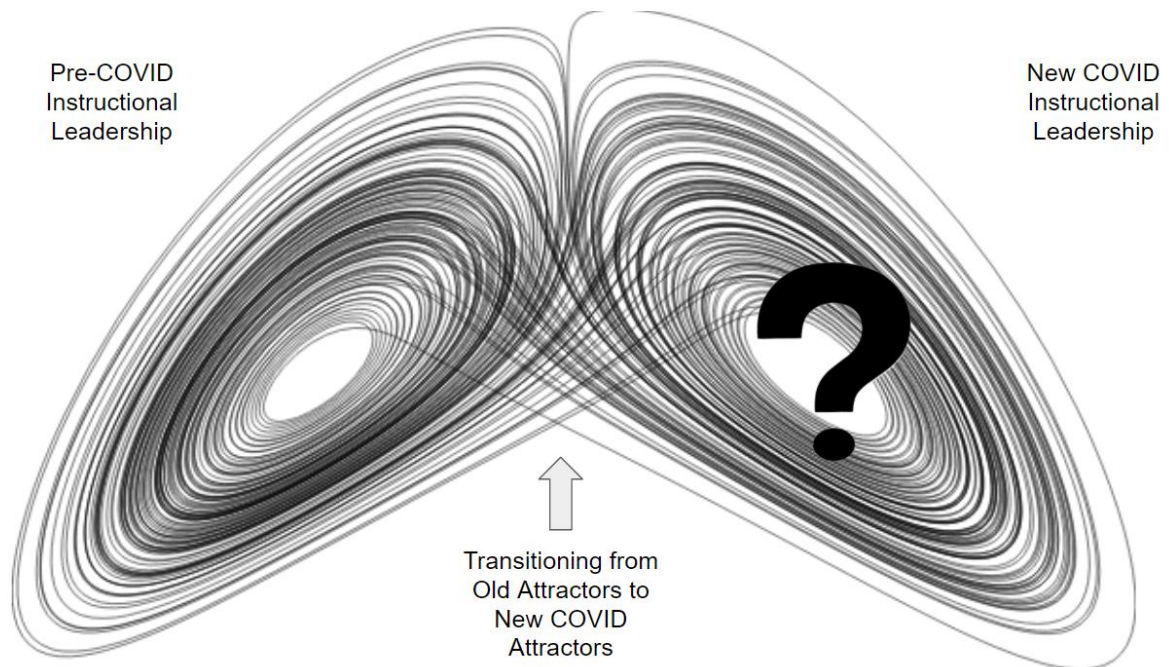
When applying chaos and complexity theory to schools, especially during this time of COVID-19, we can only question what systems will remain the same and what new systems will emerge. Knowing that organizations' greatest downfall during a crisis is when they try to do the new in old ways and fail to shift from old to new, will instructional leadership look the same in a virtual setting, or will assistant principals be able to influence the current system enough to create a new system that better serves teachers and students?

In this study, chaos and complexity theory were used to analyze how assistant principals' role as instructional leaders (d)evolved during the COVID-19 pandemic (see Figure 3). Will school leaders operate within the old system and ignore new attractors, such as instructional technology, remote learning, and daily attendance, or will school leaders transition to a new instructional leadership style?

In this study, I used the Wallace Foundation (2013) framework and chaos and complexity theory to understand how the role of assistant principals as instructional leaders (d)evolved during the COVID-19 pandemic (see Figure 4). Suppose assistant principals strive to be instructional leaders and organizations adapt throughout the change. In that case, I expect to see the role of assistant principals as instructional leaders evolve, moving away from more mundane tasks, such as attendance and discipline.

Figure 3

Instructional Leadership During COVID-19

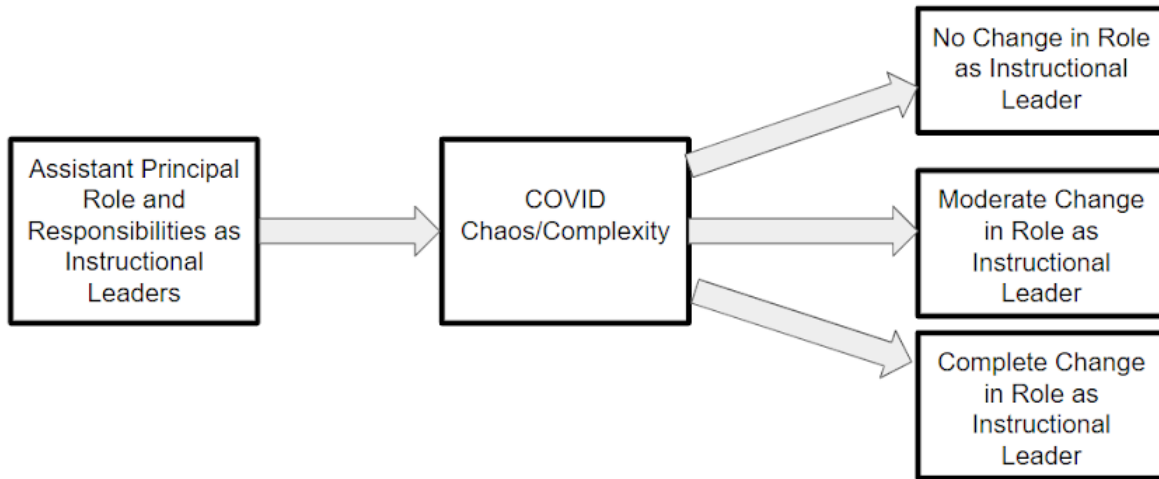


Note. Illustration adapted from Morgan, G. (2006). *Images of organization*. (Updated edition), 253.

With this being said, state regulations and policies still play a role in the function of schools and have the ability to keep school leaders tied to non-instructional practices. With school funding still currently tied to daily attendance, I predict the role of assistant principals will have a moderate change but will not completely move away from the current operation. After years of the role of assistant principals remaining stagnant, COVID-19 may push the boundaries. However, the new attractors may not be enough to move assistant principals away from their old practices.

Figure 4

Conceptual Framework: AP as Instructional Leader Shaped Through COVID



Summary

Even with years of research, it is evident that there are gaps in how assistant principals perceive their job, especially as it relates to instructional leadership. According to research, the assistant principal's role has had little development, but instructional leadership has been deeply studied from the principalship lens. As assistant principals continue to share the instructional leadership capacity with campus principals, assistant principals must receive the training and professional development necessary to feel adequate in their job. To better prepare assistant principals for the position, there needs to be an understanding of how they currently perceive their job as instructional leaders and what may hinder them from being the leader they desire to be. There also must be an understanding of how the role has evolved during the pandemic, especially as an instructional leader.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to explore how the role-in-practice of assistant principals—and the ways assistant principals perceived their role—shapes, reshapes, and influences the way they thought about and enacted instructional leadership, both pre-pandemic and during the pandemic crisis. This study explored what hindered or assisted assistant principals in being the instructional leaders they desired to be and whom their principal and district leaders expected them to be. I considered how instructional leadership specific to the assistant principal role has (d)evolved through the transition from brick-and-mortar schools to virtual learning in response to the disrupting force of COVID-19. To these ends, the study was guided by three overarching research questions:

1. How do assistant principals define and enact instructional leadership?
2. What supports or hinders assistant principals' efforts to engage in instructional leadership/function as instructional leaders?
3. How has instructional leadership for assistant principals (d)evolved throughout the COVID-19 response efforts?

In what follows, I explain the general choice for research design before turning to a description of the study context. I then describe the research plan, including the following components: study participants, data collection, data analysis, limitations, timeline, and positionality.

Research Design

This study used a sequential mixed-methods approach to examine assistant principals' experiences related to instructional leadership and organizational change. One of the main reasons for conducting mixed-methods research is that quantitative data provides a clear picture of the research problem. In contrast, qualitative data help explain the problem being studied

(Creswell, 2012). Although a mixed-methods approach was used, the majority of the data were qualitative in nature. Qualitative data tend to be inductive, allowing the researcher to explore the participants' experiences and empower them to share their stories (Creswell, 2016). Qualitative researchers have structural flexibility in conducting interviews and interpreting the participants' experiences. The qualitative approach allows the researcher to collect in-depth and rich data (Creswell, 2016). This approach is appropriate since research claims assistant principals often feel undervalued (Armstrong, 2009; Morgan, 2018) and since there has been a recent shift in teaching and learning due to the pandemic (Dhawan, 2020). A mixed-methods approach will provide an opportunity to use the results of quantitative data to identify the findings captured from the individual experiences of assistant principals as instructional leaders, both pre-and post-COVID-19. Within this study, the researcher will use a phenomenological design to identify themes and patterns to illustrate similarities and differences in assistant principals' lived experiences.

This study was intended to be exploratory and descriptive in nature; therefore, I used a phenomenological approach. Phenomenological research is structured to evaluate and describe areas in which little is known about the phenomenon (Creswell, 2016). This study was phenomenological in nature, designed to explore both the similarities and uniqueness of the participants' individual experiences related to instructional leadership, the assistant principalship, and organizational change (particularly during times of unprecedented complexity). Using qualitative methods to conduct a thematic analysis developed an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of organizational change during a major shift in education.

The mixed-methods approach of research offers many noted strengths appropriate for this study. A sequential explanatory design was used to gather quantitative data during the survey

phase of the study to inform the next phase, the interviews (Creswell, 2012). The strengths of this research include (a) the research identifying contextual factors that relate to the phenomenon, (b) the key constructs and phenomena are clearly articulated and consisted of the research questions, and (c) the data will be collected to uncover themes and patterns of a group of individuals who have all experienced the same phenomenon (Creswell, 2016). Another strength of the qualitative method is providing elaborate textual descriptions of the participants' experiences (Creswell, 2016).

Study Context

This study focused on secondary assistant principals in North Texas, specifically Education Service Center (ESC) Region XI. The ESC Region XI is one of twenty education service centers in Texas and includes 76 public school districts within 10 counties (Education Service Center, 2021). Region XI serves 598,572 students and 76,252 educational personnel (Education Service Center, 2020). I chose to study only in Texas due to the shared impact of COVID and the standard state accountability system. Although success measures may look different from campus to campus, leaders within this region use the same accountability and evaluation system. It was also important to only look at schools within Texas since schools had to follow similar protocols during the COVID-19 closure and re-opening.

Procedures

Participants

The sample participants were drawn from a population of public school secondary (middle and high school) assistant principals in the North Texas region. All participants served as secondary assistant principals in a public school in Region XI during the time of the study.

In order to recruit participants, I first visited the ESC Region XI website and located the District Directory. The directory includes each district in Region XI, the size of each district, the district website, and each school's names within the district. I created a list of school districts with populations greater than 5,000 students (23 school districts total) from the directory. I selected school districts with populations greater than 5,000 students to focus on larger school districts that potentially faced common issues during the pandemic.

Once I had a list of districts that met the requirement of 5,000 students or more, I added all of the middle and high schools within each district. After this list was compiled, I visited each district's website and located the secondary schools' web pages. I created a unique database for this study by collecting all 569 secondary assistant principals' names and email addresses.

In order to recruit participants for the interview portion of the study, I requested volunteers from the list of secondary assistant principals through a Qualtrics questionnaire sent by email (Appendix A). All participants selected for the interview portion of the study served as an assistant principal during the time of the study and had served in a secondary assistant principal role prior to COVID-19. I sent weekly follow-up emails for a total of three weeks in order to recruit more participants.

Participant Demographics for Phase One

A total of 569 secondary assistant principals from Region XI were asked to complete an electronic survey. Sixty-nine assistant principals responded; 2 declined to participate, and 8 did not meet the criteria to continue the survey for a final sample of 59 respondents. To qualify, participants were required to serve as a secondary assistant principal currently and have at least two years of experience as an assistant principal. Of the 39 participants who reported gender, 23 were female, and 16 were male. The experience in education varied, including 12.5% with 6-10

years, 27.5% with 11-15 years, 27.5% with 16-20 years, 22.5% with 21-25 years, and 10% with 26-30 years. Respondents had various years of experience as an assistant principal: 40% were a novice, with 1-5 years of experience in the position, 47.5% with 6-10 years, and 12.5% with 11-15 years. The participant group included 55% middle school and 45% high school assistant principals.

Participant Demographics for Phase Two

Out of the 59 participants from phase one, ten participants (Table 1) volunteered to participate in the second phase, the interview. The interviewed assistant principals were from eight school districts, with five middle school administrators and five high schools administrators. Of the five high school administrators, one served as an associate principal, and another previously served as a campus principal. The administrators had various experiences, from two to twelve years of experience as an assistant principal. Each interview lasted about an hour, and the participants were asked to elaborate on many of the themes addressed in the survey.

Table 1

Phase Two Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Years as AP	Grade Level	Gender
AP 1	6	Middle School	Female
AP 2	7	Middle School	Female
AP 3	2	High School	Female
AP 4	12	High School	Male
AP 5	3	Middle School	Male
AP 6	3	Middle School	Female
AP 7	7	High School	Male
AP 8	5	Middle School	Female
AP 9	9	High School	Male
AP 10	6	High School	Male

Data Collection

The data collection instruments were a survey (Appendix A) and the semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix B). The initial survey consisted of general information about the assistant principal's career history and questions that probed the participant's perspectives about the assistant principalship, particularly as the role relates to instructional leadership and COVID-19. The survey (see Appendix A) included both quantitative and qualitative questions, gathering information on how assistant principals defined instructional leadership, what their role as an instructional leader looked like, barriers that have interfered with being an instructional leader, and how their role has changed through COVID-19. This questionnaire was designed through Qualtrics and was sent through email to participants. Survey participants remained anonymous, but those that chose to volunteer for the interviews provided self-identifying information. Prior to use, the questionnaire and interview questions were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) members at Texas Christian University.

The second data collection source was the semi-structured interviews, which included more in-depth questions aligned with the Wallace Foundation (2013) definition of instructional leadership. This phenomenological research consisted of lengthy, personal interviews to fully understand and explore the participants' perceptions of instructional leadership. The questions were open-ended and covered the following board topics: (a) how assistant principals defined instructional leadership, (b) what hindered or supported assistant principals as instructional leaders, (c) how assistant principals' role as an instructional leader has d(evolved) during COVID-19. The interview questions consisted of standardized questions that were used with each participant, but I also responded with unstructured follow-up questions if necessary.

The interview questions were designed to explore instructional leadership through the Wallace Foundation (2013) instructional leadership model, which includes five domains: (a) shaping a vision of academic success for all students, one based on high standards; (b) creating a climate hospitable to education so that safety, a cooperative spirit, and other foundation of fruitful interaction prevail; (c) cultivating leadership in others so that teachers and other adults assume their part in realizing the school vision; (d) improving instruction to enable teachers to teach at their best and students to learn at their utmost; and (e) managing people, data, and processes to foster school improvement (Wallace Foundation, 2013, p. 55).

Once I identified the interview participants, I reached out by phone or email to schedule the individual virtual interview. I followed up with all scheduled interview participants via email verification. Once the interview participants were selected, each participant was interviewed individually for 45-75 minutes. All interviews were conducted, and voice recorded through WebEx, limiting the amount of body language observed but still providing the researcher and participant the opportunity to see one another.

Prior to each interview, participants were sent the study information sheet and consent documents for review. Participants were given the opportunity to consent through an e-document in Qualtrics prior to the interview. At the beginning of each interview, I reviewed consenting information, described the study, answered any questions, re-screened each participant to make sure they met the participant criteria, and asked the participant to sign the consent form (returned via email scan). The methodology, purpose, and expected time of commitment were explained during the interview protocol review. It took no longer than 10 minutes to review the interview protocol and consent form.

Once I obtained an agreement from the participant, the interview began, and the audio recording of the interview began. Each interview took approximately 60 minutes. I used the established interview guide (see Appendix B). All interviews were conducted separately. During the interview, I took notes and noted any personal feelings or assumptions to increase awareness (Yin, 2015). After each interview, I immediately captured any notes from the interview in a memo to myself (Yin, 2015).

Data Analysis

When analyzing data for both the questionnaire and interviews, I followed Yin's (2015) five-phased cycle: (1) compiling, (2) disassembling, (3) reassembling, (4) interpreting, and (5) concluding. I noted any preconceptions by using systematic procedures when analyzing data to bring awareness to positionality when interpreting the data.

Questionnaire

After the window for participants to complete the initial questionnaire was closed, I read through all responses. Then, I organized the data in two different ways: by the participant and by question to begin the coding process (Yin, 2015). When reading through the data by the participant, I used coding to identify themes. I then read through the data by the question and identified themes using coding once again. Once I coded the data with themes, I reassembled the data by theme and looked for similarities or common information. I drew conclusions about this portion of the study from the themes before conducting any interviews or analyzing the data. This data helped capture assistant principals' experiences and provided in detail the demands of the job.

Interviews

First, I personally transcribed all interviews verbatim to familiarize myself with the data. After transcribing each interview, I read through the transcript and noted any personal feelings that may have contributed to the analysis of the data (Yin, 2015). I analyzed the collected data and identified common themes regarding instructional leadership and the assistant principalship, pre- and post- COVID-19, manually and using the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, Dedoose. The initial coding was completed in the order of the interviews conducted. When analyzing the data, I created the codes (Appendix C) during the research process based on the data (Yin, 2015).

After the initial coding, I then grouped the participants' responses by the question and by the participant. I reordered the different responses to ensure that one response did not blind other potential themes. Once the interviews were coded entirely, I wrote the results in terms of thematic analysis. As I summarized the findings, I shared the assistant principals' experiences in written format. I summarized the group while providing descriptive text to portray the participants' feelings accurately. I aimed to identify themes and patterns and address the phenomenon of instructional leadership and organizational change during a pandemic.

Credibility

This study used three strategies to ensure credibility: triangulation; thick, rich descriptions; and reflective commentary with bracketing (Creswell, 2012; Creswell & Poth, 2016; Yin, 2015). Using various data-collection tools, triangulation was achieved by analyzing the responses from the questionnaire, the interview data, and the literature review. In order to convey the participants' experiences and perceptions, thick, rich descriptions were used to share

the data. Lastly, commentary with bracketing was used to allow for any preconceived beliefs of the researcher to be clarified throughout the process.

Content validity for the questionnaire was established by an expert pilot panel of two currently practicing assistant principals. The questionnaire was sent through email to the panel members, and they provided feedback about ways to improve the questionnaire and any technical problems they experienced. The pilot panel did not participate in the official survey or interview. The interview protocol and questions were piloted virtually, with the same two expert panel members. The panel members immediately provided feedback about ways to improve the interview questions and any technical problems they experienced. I used the same semi-structured interview guide for all interviews to ensure consistency and reliability of information discovered and collected. I designed the interview guide, and the committee and IRB approved it before the interviews.

Limitations

Limitations of this study included potential sample bias or selection bias based on the number of volunteers. The participants who responded to the survey may not truly be a random sample representing secondary assistant principals in North Texas. However, even with a small interview sample size, the responses collected from both the survey and the interviews aligned closely, validating the study findings.

When analyzing data, one limitation that appeared was in a survey question asking about the perceptions of assistant principals on how useful specific tasks were for creating effective systems of learning. In this particular question, participants were only allowed to choose between four options: extremely useful, very useful, moderately useful, or slightly useful. Participants

were not given the option to select ‘not useful.’ If this fifth option were added, the data might show a shift in responses.

Another limitation is that there is currently little literature on how COVID-19 has affected assistant principals as instructional leaders. Not only is there little literature, but at the time of the data collection, COVID-19 was still present in all aspects of the school system, so the aftermath of COVID-19 has not occurred.

Positionality

Within this study, it is important to note my positionality as the researcher. My personal experience as a previous assistant principal and a current principal must be noted as this influences my thinking based on my career history and personal experiences. At the time of this study, I had served for six years as a high school assistant principal in two different school districts, with all six years serving in instructional roles as the Instructional Associate Principal and the Academic Dean. Not only did I serve time as an assistant principal, but I also was in a rare position where I was able to focus solely on instructional leadership and not have the same responsibilities as the other assistant principals on campus, such as overseeing discipline. At the time of this study, I served as a secondary campus principal.

After working in the assistant principal role and supporting assistant principals, I had to be intentional with my questioning and interpretation of data, not to assume what assistant principals were feeling. I also had to be cautious not to conflate the participants' experiences with my personal experiences. To separate my experiences from the research, I noted my feelings when transcribing and coding the responses. I also used memos and debriefing with my peers to assist in surfacing any assumptions.

I also bracketed any personal feelings or assumptions to reduce researcher bias. Moustakas' phenomenology method focuses on human experiences' essence, and he believed these experiences are consistent with human relationships (Creswell, 2016). I must set aside any preconceptions within this method, using systematic procedures to analyze the data, including bracketing (Creswell, 2016).

Through bracketing, I gained insight and set aside preconceived ideas about the participants' lived experiences. I recalled my personal experiences as an assistant principal; therefore, the process of bracketing allowed me to set aside any preconceptions and focus on the participants' perspectives. Separating my experiences ensured that only the participants' perspective views were heard to understand their experiences.

Summary

This chapter discusses the research design, description of participants, data collection, data analysis, limitations, timeline, and positionality for this study. I used two sources of data collection, an initial questionnaire, and an individual interview. Once data was collected, I worked diligently to share the assistant principals' stories and the phenomenon of working as instructional leaders during a pandemic.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of assistant principals and how they perceived their role as instructional leaders both pre- and post-COVID. Three overarching research questions guided the study:

1. How do assistant principals define and enact instructional leadership?
2. What supports or hinders assistant principals' efforts to engage in instructional leadership/function as instructional leaders?
3. How has instructional leadership for assistant principals (d)evolved throughout the COVID-19 response efforts?

The study findings described in this section were drawn from quantitative and qualitative methods through surveys and interviews conducted with secondary assistant principals. A sequential explanatory design was used to gather data from the first phase to inform the study's second phase (Creswell, 2012). The findings of the first phase were used to develop interview questions relevant to the assistant principals' perceptions as instructional leaders. During the second phase, the perceptions and feelings of assistant principals were captured through interviews. A phenomenological inquiry was used to understand further the assistant principals' perceptions as instructional leaders, pre- and post-COVID.

Research Question 1: Instructional Leadership Defined and Enacted

During both the survey and the interview, the participants were asked how they defined instructional leadership. Initially, during the interview, most of the participants hesitated when asked the question. Some of the participants made comments about feeling like they should be able to answer the question easily but found it was much harder to put into words than expected.

AP 6 even said, “I don't know if I have a perfect definition. I just know what I feel like myself and our other assistant principals do on a daily basis that actually feels like leadership about instruction.” AP 3 said, “I feel like I should have a really good answer, but I don't have a really good answer. There are so many different things to consider.” After talking to all ten participants, it was clear that they did not have a set definition of instructional leadership. However, they could give examples of what they did daily that they felt tied to instructional leadership. Through all of their examples, it was evident that they were in alignment with their thoughts about instructional leadership but felt there was not just one way to define such an important concept.

As the assistant principals tried to develop a concrete definition, several would turn toward a more philosophical perspective. AP 5 provided the following definition: “Instructional leadership means to enhance the teaching and learning.” This simple definition can be seen as encompassing the other definitions provided. The focus is on teaching and learning for students and teaching and learning for teachers and administrators. AP 8 articulated that instructional leadership is “not just about making sure the kids are learning. It's about making sure that the teachers are learning, too.” While analyzing their responses, I found the assistant principals described instructional leadership, both in their interview and on the survey, using four main themes: supporting teachers, being present in classrooms, participating in PLCs, and supporting the environment outside of the classrooms.

Supporting Teachers

Within the survey responses and interviews, “supporting teachers” was the most commonly used phrase to define instructional leadership. All 10 interview respondents included an aspect of supporting teachers when defining instructional leadership, whether it was coaching

teachers, providing feedback to teachers after classroom visits, or participating in PLCs.

According to respondents, instructional leaders support teachers by identifying strengths and providing feedback to grow their instructional practices. Several respondents referred to creating a space for teachers to learn, create, develop, grow, and collaborate. AP 3 explained further:

So, what that looks like to me is that you are creating the space for your teachers to plan, to have professional development, to grow, to collaborate. So, you are setting the example for that and giving them the time and space to do that. You're also always pushing towards not only your teachers' growth but your students' growth, so you're always thinking about how can we do what we do, the best that we can do it so that our students can gain student success. And so, in that again, it's the time that you created for teachers, the professional development you've created for teachers, the professional development you're attending for yourself. So, creating a space for everyone to take ownership and lead the instruction in a way that's going to promote teacher growth and student success.

As assistant principals continued to provide examples of supporting teachers, all those interviewed mentioned their role of supporting teachers by visiting classrooms and providing instructional feedback, which aligns with a traditional view of instructional leadership.

Classroom Visits

Whether focused on formative evaluations or informal walkthroughs, visiting classrooms was mentioned throughout the survey and during the interviews. All of the assistant principals interviewed alluded to their time visiting classrooms when defining instructional leadership, even quoting AP 4, saying, "I would define instructional leadership as a person that understands good teaching because good teaching is recognizable when you see it. Bad teaching is recognizable

when you see it, too.” When discussing visiting classrooms, it was never mentioned that the assistant principals were doing it because it was required, but because they found it helpful to provide support and feedback to teachers by being present in classrooms. AP 9 described instructional leadership as the following:

I think the biggest thing for me when I think about instructional leadership is being transparent with my teachers about the things that I do or don't see in the classroom. Any time I visit, whether it's a formal setting or an informal setting, I have to make sure that, as a person over instruction here at the campus, the expectations are clear as to what we want to see in the classroom. It is just being clear with my expectations, and then when I see that those expectations are not being met, I make it a point to be transparent with our teachers and let them know that there are things that need to be worked on or that need to be fixed. So that's the main thing, and if indeed there is a question about what that looks like in the classroom, then I have to be able to provide feedback to them as to how I would do it, whether it would be my modeling, whether it would be by setting up continuous meetings with that teacher to have that conversation of what that potentially would look like. I think it's important for our teachers to know that my job is not just to critique but it's to help them grow, and that's the most important aspect of teaching. If I can put them in a setting where they're comfortable and knowing that my role is to help them grow and not to fire them, then I think they perform better.

With these examples throughout the interviews, it was evident that assistant principals genuinely tried to support teachers and help them be the best in the classroom. This support also carried over to the assistant principals' active participation in PLCs.

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)

PLCs were used frequently by participants in the survey and during the interviews to describe instructional leadership in action. Instructional leadership includes the planned PLCs where content groups intentionally look at student data with the administration's support. During the interviews, the administrators described their roles in PLCs as instructional support, often not leading the PLCs but being a resource to the teachers when needed. As a resource, this would include reaching out to district-level support, making decisions that aligned with the campus and district goals, and offering input when needed. Following is how AP 7 defined their role as an instructional leader when participating in PLCs:

I think instructional leadership is being not only a resource but a guide with completing the instructional expectations not only from the state but more specifically from the campus and district-level to ensure that we're fulfilling what we need from that instructional standpoint but going deeper, making sure we're guiding it to help students be successful. So, I don't think that we were strictly just somebody there as a resource. I think as an instructional leader, a true instructional leader should also be bringing something to the table to help teachers either analyze data or look at new instructional strategies, or you know, kind of give them an overview and have those conversations. I wouldn't even call them critical because if you built up a good relationship with the teacher, then it should be a comfortable conversation, more of a coaching conversation. I think a lot of that kind of fits into that job description, and we're a resource and a guide to helping students succeed.

While questioning the assistant principals about their role as instructional leaders, not one assistant principal discussed the need to know the content taught in the classroom to be an

instructional leader. They did discuss effective teaching strategies and coaching teachers, but they did not discuss the need for their teaching experience to align with the content they supervise. AP 5 even went further to say:

I think that there are direct roles you can play and that you have an opportunity to provide absolute intervention for teachers in that you do coach them through whether it be an issue of classroom management or maybe if it's a content area that you have some greater knowledge about that with a teacher. But I don't necessarily know that instructional leadership absolutely has to be tied to the discussion of standards and only pedagogy that is related to the alignment of the TEKS. I think that it can be encompassing in terms of supporting a teacher in an area of need that ultimately results in a better learning experience for a kid.

PLCs alone was one of the most common answers in the survey and interviews when asking assistant principals how they enacted instructional leadership. The assistant principals valued being present in PLCs to support teachers when needed and to be a resource and liaison between the district and the campus.

Outside the Classroom

When initially asked about instructional leadership, very few assistant principals mentioned the environment outside of the classroom. After prompting the participants about how instructional leadership is defined and enacted outside the classroom, they gave more explicit examples. Assistant principals explained how they create an environment where there is a culture of trust and support between the staff and administrators. This environment includes building relationships and knowing the teachers deeper than their experience in the classroom. Effective

instructional leaders do not micromanage their teachers but give them the resources to succeed and take ownership of their work. AP 5 explained further:

Creating an environment that is sort of that collegial environment to where individuals feel comfortable and encouraged to share best practices—creating an environment in which individuals naturally want to be good researchers and then have that practice available to all of their teaching partners so that all kids on the campus can see. I think that you can have some tangential leadership practices that ultimately impact instruction but aren't directly defined as you going in and picking out something specific that happened within a 45-minute class period.

The assistant principals clarified throughout the interviews that instructional leadership is not only visible within classrooms or relegated to just being in PLCs. Instructional leadership includes “conversations with the teachers in passing” where a teacher may seek support.

The interviewed participants also explained that instructional leadership is not a calculated task where everything is planned out. However, most of the time, it is acting in the moment and responding to events. This could include a teacher needing support with a particular student and how to reach them, or a teacher wanting to take a risk and try a new lesson and wanting feedback or supporting students. Several assistant principals went even further to say their role as instructional leaders was to check in on teachers and see what they needed and how they were doing outside of their job. Often teachers would feel overwhelmed with all the responsibilities of the job, so assistant principals would support instruction by providing a listening ear and sorting through the priorities. Assistant principals felt like part of their job was permitting teachers to decide what was important in their classroom instead of feeling like they had to tackle it all. When discussing relationships with teachers, AP 9 said:

You know we talked about relationship building all the time with our teachers and telling them to take the time to get to know their students. I think that's the same for you to know us in our role. We have to take the time to get to know our teachers because, at the end of the day, they have lives outside of school that will affect what happens inside of that classroom. You know, and it's important to, just like we would for any kid, listen to them and talk through situations with them, it's the same thing for our staff. I think that's extremely important, even more so this upcoming year. There's a lot of things that have happened, you know, to our staff and their families that sometimes we're not even aware of, so it's important to let them know that you care for them.

Perceptions

When interviewing the participants, I asked them whether they felt their campus principal perceived them as instructional leaders and why they felt that way. During the interview, I also defined instructional leadership and asked the assistant principals if they perceived themselves as instructional leaders based on the definition given. Below is a summary of their responses.

Principal's Perception

Although the assistant principals could describe what they did to enact instructional leadership, it was evident that they did not always feel effective or valued in their role. However, when the interview participants were questioned about whether or not they thought their campus principal perceived them as an instructional leader, many assistant principals felt that they did because of the feedback they received from their principal about how they support their assigned departments and their teachers. They went into detail to explain that their campus principals would have conversations with them around supporting teachers by providing feedback and having coaching conversations.

While most of the conversations regarding the relationship with their campus principal were positive, there was a common theme of assistant principals feeling the pressure to complete walkthroughs and not always finding the time to enter their walkthroughs in the system due to all of their other responsibilities. Several of the assistant principals spoke of the desire to wanting to be better instructional leaders. However, it often felt like all the other duties assigned got in the way of focusing solely on instruction.

Assistant Principal Perceptions: Are you an Instructional Leader?

At the end of the interview, each participant was asked whether or not they would consider themselves an instructional leader based on the following defining components of instructional leadership: setting direction, developing people, focusing on learning, and improving the instructional program. Although there was little to no context given around these four components, there was a wide range of responses to this particular question, with some participants saying that that definition described them 100%, 70%, 50% to even one flat-out saying no, that their job is only set up to address one of those components, which was developing people. When given these components of instructional leadership, the assistant principals were able to identify areas of strengths and areas of growth based on their current practices. Without knowing how instructional leadership was defined during the interview, most participants hit on all four components without even knowing it. Seven of the ten participants reflected on their personal experience within the four components and concluded that there is room for growth as an instructional leader. One participant communicated that they felt like they participated in all four components throughout the school year, but there is no daily evidence of each component. With this context provided, it was evident that the assistant principals felt like they sometimes served as instructional leaders but not as much as they wished they could.

Assistant Principal Perceptions of Assigned Tasks

During the survey, assistant principals were asked to rate how useful specific tasks were in creating an effective system of learning. With the array of tasks assigned to assistant principals, the participants had clear feelings about which responsibilities tied to instructional leadership. Table 2 depicts assistant principals’ perceptions regarding which job responsibilities they think contribute to creating/sustaining an effective system for learning. It is evident when looking at Table 2 that assistant principals feel that the following responsibilities contribute to an effective learning environment: teacher evaluations, hiring, and retention of teachers and staff, PLCs, master schedule, professional learning/development days.

Table 2

Perceptions of Assistant Principals: Creating Effective Systems for Learning

	Extremely useful	Very useful	Moderately useful	Slightly useful
Attendance	35%	28%	30%	8%
Discipline	40%	23%	33%	5%
Teacher Evaluations	58%	23%	18%	3%
Hiring and retention of teachers and staff	68%	25%	8%	0%
State testing	15%	23%	25%	38%
Special Education ARDs/IEP Meetings	25%	43%	30%	3%
504 Meetings	25%	40%	33%	3%
School safety drills/Emergency procedures	15%	10%	38%	38%
Professional Learning Communities	78%	18%	5%	0%
Faculty Meetings	25%	28%	45%	3%
Extracurricular events (administrator on duty)	8%	13%	25%	55%
Master schedule	48%	33%	15%	5%
Distributing textbooks	3%	10%	28%	60%
Overseeing transportation/parking	3%	8%	21%	69%
Professional learning/development days	60%	35%	5%	0%
Response to Intervention Coordinator	35%	30%	25%	10%
Overseeing substitutes	10%	15%	45%	30%
Overseeing clubs/organizations	5%	18%	30%	48%
Overseeing technology	31%	36%	10%	23%

Responsibilities that assistant principals felt were moderately or slightly useful for the instructional environment included school safety drills/emergency procedures, extracurricular events, distributing textbooks, overseeing transportation/parking, overseeing substitutes, and overseeing clubs/organizations. There was a limitation in this particular question because assistant principals did not have the option to choose “not useful at all.” However, the data still provided some insight into how the assistant principals felt about specific tasks.

Compared to the Wallace Foundation Model

While analyzing the data, I referred back to the Wallace Foundation (2013) framework to break down the participants' definitions and enactment of instructional leadership. The following summarizes how the assistant principals addressed each domain within their responses.

Domain 1: Shaping a vision of academic success for all students, one based on high standards.

The assistant principals often mentioned their participation in PLCs and digging into student data. Occasionally, the participants would mention the vision of the campus. AP 6 in particular said:

I think instructional leadership is having a willingness to gather resources and connect them with people but to be alongside teachers to say, “I want to take just as much accountability in this data as you and let's work collaboratively to keep what's important, which is student achievement.” And without a good vision, without a good mission, without having some type of foundational mindset and goal for your campus, you can't be a good instructional leader because you don't even know where you want your kids to go.

Domain 2: Creating a climate hospitable to education so that safety, a cooperative spirit, and other foundation of fruitful interaction prevail.

When the assistant principals were asked to describe instructional leadership outside the classroom, all ten participants mentioned the climate and creating a place where students and staff felt supported. All participants also included the importance of building relationships with staff and students. AP 4 said:

Instructional leadership goes to support the person first, and then as they feel well and they feel good about what they're doing, instruction comes up too. Also, the learning and engagement improve because a happy teacher engages students better than a sad teacher that is behind their desk.

Domain 3: Cultivating leadership in others so that teachers and other adults assume their part in realizing the school vision.

Out of the ten interviews, not a single participant mentioned cultivating leadership. A few mentioned growing teachers in the classroom but not building leaders within the school to help align others with the school vision. Within the survey, one participant described instructional leadership as “the ability to build capacity in teachers and staff,” but this was a rare response with little elaboration.

Domain 4: Improving instruction to enable teachers to teach at their best and students to learn at their utmost.

This domain was by far the one that assistant principals addressed the most. All ten participants mentioned in their interviews the importance of supporting teachers by visiting classrooms, providing feedback, and participating in PLCs, and without hesitation, when the assistant principals were asked to define instructional leadership, they all explained improving instruction within the classrooms.

Domain 5: Managing people, data, and processes to foster school improvement.

Within this domain, the assistant principals never used the word “manage” to describe their interactions with students or staff. However, they did spend time talking about working with teachers and helping them grow, looking at data, and putting systems in place to ensure an effective and efficient school environment. AP 3 noted below:

Again, I know they're many definitions about instructional leadership, so I am just going to go kind of like with my thought. Everything we do should really support teacher growth and student growth on a campus. So that doesn't necessarily mean that you are directly doing something in the classroom. However, as an instructional leader, you should be creating an environment in a culture that allows student growth and teacher growth to happen on your campus. As I mentioned before, in your hiring decisions, in your own visibility as a leader, are you visible, does the culture of the campus feel like you want to be there, does the culture of the campus feel like you're invested, are you creating a safe and positive environment because even though that's not a “TEKs” per se, all of that, the mindset of your campus, are you creating a fixed or a growth mindset, can people make mistakes, is it safe, like all of those things affect the classroom, even if it's not directly an instructional strategy.

Overall, assistant principals struggled to provide a concrete definition of instructional leadership. However, without hesitation, they provided examples of how they enact instructional leadership in their day-to-day work.

Research Question 2: Supports and Barriers of Assistant Principals

When interviewing assistant principals about their role as instructional leaders, participants were asked to explain what supports they have received to encourage their instructional leadership and what barriers have kept them from being the instructional leader they

desire. Factors that supported assistant principals included their campus principal and peer support. Factors that hindered assistant principals included fires, time management, directives from central administration, and community expectations.

Factors that Supported Assistant Principals as Instructional Leaders

After interviewing the assistant principals and reviewing the survey data, it was evident that a couple of critical factors assisted administrators in feeling supported as instructional leaders. These factors included principal influence and peer support. The assistant principals did not have much more to say about their support as instructional leaders outside of these two factors.

Principal Influence

The assistant principals often spoke about their campus principal and their influence on their leadership practices. Whether through modeling, assignment of duties, or a clear vision, the assistant principals felt a clear connection between their relationship with their campus principal and how they enacted instructional leadership on their campus. AP 10 said the following about their campus principal:

She gets into the classroom, she walks around, she does what we do, she shows us how this needs to be done, and she does a phenomenal job of always putting a positive spin on everything she does, even when it comes to holding teachers accountable for the things that they're doing, it's still a positive spin.

The assistant principal continued to explain how having a principal that models instructional leadership behavior has positively influenced their work and wanting to be a better instructional leader. AP 7 explained their view of the campus principal as the following:

It should be a trickle-down effect. It should be the principal not only passing the message of the mission and vision of what we're trying to accomplish at the campus level, but that person should be immersed in that instructional leadership. That person should be in classrooms. That person should ensure that their assistant principals are also in classrooms and make that a priority.

Not only did the assistant principals talk about the need for their campus principal to model the behavior, but also the importance of having a campus principal that fully supports and backs the assistant principals in making instruction a priority, even if that means other tasks may slip through the cracks. AP 5 provided an example of this support below when he made an unpopular decision:

It was something in an effort to correctly prioritize, like what are the things that we're going to do here. And that comes from, that came from the building principal. Like I couldn't have done that because people were upset. But I couldn't have done that without having someone supporting me, like, "that's ok that they are upset." Let's walk them through what our priorities are and what our focuses are, and then we will get them on board with it. And understand there's going to be frustrating parts about being educators and some that we can deal with, but there are some parts where kids aren't growing, and they're not learning, and that is one we can't tolerate.

AP 1 also discussed being fully supported by the campus principal to make the best instructional decisions for the departments they oversee. "I feel like there should be enough trust between the AP and the principal to where an AP should be able to make a decision and is backed by the principal." To confirm this feeling, AP 5 stated:

Having the leadership of the building principal that understood the long-term goal was to have a shared leadership experience within the building. So, he has given me the latitude to prioritize elements of behaviors and habits that ultimately positively impact instruction but may be at the cost of not returning phone calls about discipline in a timely manner. That was just something that we were willing to work through in an effort to recognize I'm not doing it because I'm lazy or because I am doing something else, it is because I am in the classrooms.

As assistant principals continued to reflect on factors that supported them as instructional leaders, it was evident that those who had supportive principals made a difference in how they perceived their role as instructional leaders on campus. Not only was the relationship with their principal important, but they also valued their relationship with their peers.

Peer Support

When interviewing the administrators, they often spoke of the importance of having a strong administrative team and working collaboratively with their colleagues to work toward the campus's vision and mission. It was evident that the assistant principals felt they were serving as instructional leaders when those around them were also focused on serving as instructional leaders, even claiming “don’t underestimate the importance of that team.” AP 3 said:

As instructional leaders, you should try to work closely with other assistant principals. If you have other administrators on your campus, or other APs that you have good relationships with, they’re going to know your campus, and they’re going to know your students, and so they’re going to be able to see where you are, have your same point of view, which will be helpful because they may have your same point of view where you’re working, but they’re going to have different experiences in a different background and so

being able to work with them and talk through issues on campus will help build you as an instructional leader. When you don't have that team, you will know that you missed it.

AP 2 said:

I mean, definitely work with your colleagues, establish that relationship with them, build trust and then just push each other to excel and push each other to grow and help your teachers and students grow. Your relationship with your principal is another resource. They obviously have been through a little bit more, and they can see that even when we don't always agree or disagree, they still have a broader picture, even if it's just because they're getting more information from the district than we are as assistant principals.

The assistant principals explained that it is not just having relationships with other administrators on campus and a functional administrative team. However, it is also aligning goals and expectations through calibrating that helps build continuity throughout the campus. AP 9 better explained it as:

I think one of the most important things that an administrative team could do to make sure that everybody's on the same page is to do walkthroughs of the campus together so that they can really calibrate what they want to see in the classroom. Obviously, with the principal's guidance of what they may want to see in the classroom. This is the type of teacher we want to see. This is the type of questioning that we want to see, and if everybody has an understanding of that, I think that makes everybody a better instructional leader.

AP 3 elaborated:

Becoming an instructional leader, I think you have to understand the people, and that's where collaboration comes into play. You have to understand and create goals that are going to lead to not only your growth but teacher growth and student growth.

Not only did the assistant principals find value in relationships with other assistant principals on their campus, but also building relationships with other instructional leaders outside of their particular campus. When reflecting on their principal preparation programs, several assistant principals mentioned the support of their colleagues and how that particular support has continued throughout their professional careers. "I really appreciate and respect the cohort model. I think in-person classrooms are vital." Those who participated in an in-person cohort model principal preparation program spoke of the strong peer connections made through the process and how they have life-long colleagues that they reach out to for support.

In contrast, those who did not participate in a cohort model did not have much to say about their preparation programs. AP 3 even recommended that instructional leaders "try to build relationships with other assistant principals outside of your campus." In the words of AP 5:

The cohorts that were in-person had much more connections. These individuals work in different school districts and are bonded in such a manner that they still maintain a relationship. They will share information, they will talk, lean on each other, so I think that's vital.

To sum up the importance of a supportive campus principal and trusted colleagues, AP 3 said it best, "The biggest thing is having at least a team that you can work well with but also a leader who recognizes all the ways that you're being pushed and pulled and just sort of support you and walk with you through that." To solidify the point, AP 10 said:

Administrative work is challenging, even more so for a principal, but as an assistant principal, you are right next to that, and so just building a strong team is what would be helpful for an assistant principal. To be a part of a strong team and support to build relationships and coach teachers and just an awareness of responsibilities and how to not only teach the assistant principal how to delegate but how to help kind of assistant principals, if necessary, delegate it up when needed.

Through all the interviews and survey data, it is apparent that assistant principals value relationships with their supervisors and colleagues to help them grow as instructional leaders. When asked what hindered assistant principals as instructional leaders, it was much easier to provide concrete examples of what interfered with them being the instructional leaders they desired to be.

Factors that Hindered Assistant Principals as Instructional Leaders

Through reviewing the survey and interview data, it was apparent that assistant principals found it much easier to answer what hinders them from acting as instructional leaders over what supports them as instructional leaders. Between the unknown of the day, time management, district expectations, or the community expectations, assistant principals voiced their struggles with serving as the instructional leader they wanted and needed to be for their campus.

Fires

Several participants mentioned the word “fires” when describing the challenges of being an instructional leader. “I would say it's the little fires. It's all the little stuff.” Even when assistant principals had a schedule and plan for the day, they often knew their day would get “hijacked” and described their typical day as “no day looks the same.” “A typical day at my school, not book answer, when you asked me what is it that I do, I put out fires all day from the

time I get here until the time that I leave.” AP 8 described their job as, “I’m telling you there's all this stuff going on that literally is crisis, after crisis after crisis but big stuff. That’s our full-time job.” AP 1 said, “It is crisis mode after crisis mode.” AP 7 described their typical day as the factor that hinders them from being instructional leaders. They said:

I would say just the whirlwind of things that we have to do. The whirlwind of taking care of discipline. The whirlwind of calling parents back within a 24-hour time frame. And that sounds easy, but if you got multiple parents calling here and there about random things that may or may not be dealing with their kid, that pulls time away. If you have a situation where you need to talk to a student or talk to a teacher, you know, away from crying on that particular day. I mean there's so many things that gets in the way, and that's the whirlwind. So, unless it's the true focus of the campus and, you know, the leadership within there, it's difficult to make sure that that is being held to a high standard, making sure that your assistant principals are instructional leaders.

As assistant principals continued to express their frustrations with all the “fires” that take them away from serving as instructional leaders, they also shared frustrations with not having enough time to do all their delegated duties.

Time Management

With all of the fires and unknowns, assistant principals expressed their frustration with being pulled in so many different ways but not having enough time to do everything needed. “So, my job is more day-to-day operational. I think that my job is more in the trenches. I mean, I think it comes down to just tasks. I'm the day-to-day. I'm the trench worker.” With limited time, assistant principals felt the pressure to decide what they would prioritize and what ultimately

would be dropped. When AP 9 was asked what the most significant obstacle was that interfered with being an instructional leader, he said:

Time. For me, it's always time. It feels like you know that the time goes very quickly throughout the day to where you cannot do all the things you want to do in that particular time frame. When I talk about the day-to-day operation of a campus, you wish it was just all solely focused on instruction, but unfortunately, that's not always the case. You know we have, there's customer service that needs to happen with our parents and our stakeholders in the community, so taking care of that, making sure that you know there are no other things that are preventing the campus from running smoothly. Discipline can play a hand in that. Duty can play a hand in that, so time is my biggest obstacle the majority of the time.

AP 5 talked about how focusing on being an instructional leader is an active choice, but that active choice means dropping other tasks or responsibilities. He said:

Well, instructional leadership is still a choice. I could have made a better choice about what I did with my time. I could have been more intentional about the fact that there was time and effort that could be made and identified some more reasonable and effective things to do with it. It means you have to make an active choice to engage with instructional leadership because, at least for me, all that other stuff is easy. It's easy in the sense of like sometimes the conversations you're having with families are difficult, sometimes the topics that you're working with kids through are really severe in nature but identifying like this is what you need to do with this task, that's fairly simple. The hard work is trying to figure out how do I work with this adult individual on making sure that the kids in their classroom learning to the best of their ability? What do I need to do as an

individual to improve my understanding of the content and that curriculum and identify the downfalls of things that that person can't mitigate no matter what? And then what are their identified barriers that I'm going to have to spend time and discover ways to help them overcome. That's the challenging or difficult stuff to do. And so, you have to make an active choice to start down that path.

The assistant principals also expressed their frustrations with how much time they dedicate daily to monitor students through "duty." Whether it was morning duty, lunch duty, hallway duty, or after-school duty, the assistant principals felt stretched thin trying to accomplish everything when pulled in so many different directions during a school day. "You know, part of my day, unfortunately, throughout every single day, there's a duty that's involved, specifically lunch duty. Every single administrator, on a daily basis, has right around an hour 40, an hour 45 minutes that we have to be on duty during lunch." AP 9 voiced a similar sentiment:

I'll tell you one thing if school systems really want their administrators to be true instructional leaders, they need to take away some of the time that's killed with being at duty or some things like that. Hire some people on the campus that will go take care of some of those things, whether it is being in the cafeteria, being in the hallways, or being at duties in the mornings or afternoons, so that the teachers or the administrators can really go focus on what's happening in the classrooms. I think we lose too much time of our administrators by just being at duty...because of a lack of personnel. But just giving that time back and knowing that we can be in classrooms an entire day and not necessarily have to worry about being at a specific location, that would be massive.

With campus expectations to monitor students, district expectations also interfere with assistant principals' ability to focus on instruction.

Directives/Expectations from Central Administration

While interviewing the assistant principals, a common theme was the frustration with the directives given by central administration and the feeling that the expectations were constantly changing, making it harder for assistant principals to serve as instructional leaders because they felt they constantly had to pivot. AP 10 explained their frustration further:

What happens is we will get a directive to turn around and implement some new program, some new assessment, or whatever the case may be. The teachers will, you know, basically complain about it, be frustrated with it, and then you're having to do crowd control, trying to get them to understand why we're doing this. This is a directive. This is the direction we're going and trying to get them on board with that and then pushing them in the right direction. We've had a lot of turmoil changes from the structure of our classes. It's a lot of addressing those things and trying to keep people off of soap boxes so that we can turn around and focus on where we need to be.

AP 7 explained their frustrations with the structure and felt they were not set up to be instructional leaders. He said:

I think the way that the structure is and how it is set up prevents me as an individual from being more of an instructional leader. I think that the way and the expectations of the campus and the community prevent us from being a more stringent instructional leader, not stringent but more of an immersed instructional leader.

AP 2 had the same sentiment:

I think that the way that the structure is in this district is not beneficial for allowing assistant principals to be true instructional leaders or at least grow within that capacity. And I'm not saying that the campus learning coach should not be present. I think that they

should be, but that person should be a support rather than viewed as the primary instructional leader.

While assistant principals were discussing the struggles of being instructional leaders, several mentioned the frustrations of the district's classroom walkthrough expectations. None of the assistant principals felt like they shouldn't be in classrooms, but they felt more pressure to check the box of being in classrooms rather than visiting classrooms and providing quality feedback to teachers. A couple of assistant principals mentioned the need to fill a quota of classroom visits and to get feedback documented in the system, even if they had a conversation with the teacher discussing feedback from the class visit. AP 3 described it as follows:

The expectation is there. Almost neglect of other tasks, not neglect that is a harsh word, but just the sense of you should always be in the classrooms, always be in the classrooms, always be in the classrooms. Yes, but you always have to have space for all the other things that happen, so I think there is this space there. However, I don't necessarily know that I've experienced the support in like a mentorship/professional development type way that is understanding of my main priority is to be in the classroom and that I don't disagree with their importance.

Community Expectations

As assistant principals expressed their struggles with district expectations, they also spoke of how community expectations also functioned as a factor that hindered them from being true instructional leaders. When working on campus, the assistant principals spoke of the need to please the community, even if it meant taking away time from being an instructional leader. AP 6 even felt the pressure to put the community first over instruction by saying:

It is my absolute commitment to responding to emails, you know, and making sure parents feel heard. I want people to know I'm here for you, and I will tell you, it has made it to where I joke, and I'm like yeah, the only time I ever get anything done is Friday at 4:00 like that's it because I'm doing that. Parents are not afraid to literally (it could be our community, and you know, maybe that's it too), but they literally will just show up, and they're like, do you have time for a meeting. I never say no. So, we drop everything. We're like okay, let's sit, let's talk, and it's so much faster to deal with that, but it does take you away of where sometimes there have been times where I miss a PLC, but I'll quickly type up hey, I'm in a meeting or something and I'll come back up and follow up.

As assistant principals struggled to elaborate on the supports they were given to serve as instructional leaders, they wasted no time discussing all of the factors that have kept them from focusing on instruction.

Research Question 3: Effects of COVID on Assistant Principals

At the time of the interviews and survey, assistant principals were just wrapping up the 2020-2021 school year. In what many said was the most challenging year they have experienced in education, the assistant principals contributed the majority of the struggles to the changes in health and safety protocols, the change to virtual instruction, and changes in traditional operating systems.

Transition from Pre-COVID to Post-COVID Practices

During the survey, assistant principals were asked to select which responsibilities they were assigned pre- and post-COVID. For this particular question, 51 out of the 59 assistant principals completed the question in its entirety. As seen in Table 3, prior to COVID, most assistant principals were assigned job responsibilities that included overseeing attendance,

discipline, teacher evaluations, professional learning/development days, Special Education ARDs/IEP meetings, PLCs, extracurricular events, and overseeing a department.

Table 3 also provides data about the post-COVID responsibilities assistant principals were assigned. During the 2020-2021 COVID school year, assistant principals were not assigned the following responsibilities at the same rate as pre-COVID: discipline, hiring and retention of teachers and staff, professional learning days, overseeing clubs/organizations, PLCs, distributing textbooks, and overseeing a department.

Table 3

Assistant Principal Assignments Pre- and Post-COVID

	Pre-COVID Response Count	Pre-COVID Percentage	Post-COVID Response Count	Post-COVID Percentage
Attendance	41	80%	39	76%
Discipline	50	98%	42	82%
Teacher Evaluations	49	96%	45	88%
Hiring and retention of teachers and staff	44	86%	35	69%
Master schedule	24	47%	23	45%
Overseeing transportation/parking	19	37%	14	27%
Professional learning/development days	41	80%	32	63%
Overseeing clubs/organizations	25	49%	14	27%
State testing	26	51%	24	47%
Special Education ARDs/IEP Meetings	44	86%	43	84%
504 Meetings	39	76%	36	71%
School safety drills/Emergency procedures	31	61%	25	49%
Professional Learning Communities	49	96%	40	78%
Faculty Meetings	37	73%	32	63%
Extracurricular events (administrator on duty)	49	96%	42	82%
Distributing textbooks	24	47%	12	24%
Response to Intervention Coordinator	22	43%	19	37%
Overseeing substitutes	14	27%	12	24%
Overseeing technology	16	31%	18	35%
Other (please specify)	8	16%	12	24%
Overseeing a department or grade level	49	96%	40	78%

Data show a change in assignments as assistant principals responded to the pandemic. The 16% drop in discipline correlates to fewer students being on campus due to remote learning options. It is also important to note that participation in PLCs and overseeing a department dropped 18% during the pandemic, shifting the focus of assistant principal duties away from instructional practices.

Table 4

Duties Consuming the Most Time Pre- and Post-COVID

	Pre-COVID Response Count	Pre-COVID Percentage	Post-COVID Response Count	Post-COVID Percentage
Attendance	19	37%	39	76%
Discipline	40	78%	25	49%
Teacher Evaluations	30	59%	15	29%
Hiring and retention of teachers and staff	4	8%	3	6%
Master schedule	5	10%	7	14%
Overseeing transportation/parking	2	4%	0	0%
Professional learning/development days	3	6%	3	6%
Overseeing clubs/organizations	0	0%	0	0%
State testing	11	22%	7	14%
Special Education ARDs/IEP Meetings	24	47%	28	55%
504 Meetings	20	39%	16	31%
School safety drills/Emergency procedures	3	6%	4	8%
Professional Learning Communities	14	27%	18	35%
Faculty Meetings	1	2%	1	2%
Extracurricular events (administrator on duty)	5	10%	6	12%
Distributing textbooks	2	4%	1	2%
Response to Intervention Coordinator	6	12%	6	12%
Overseeing substitutes	0	0%	2	4%
Overseeing technology	5	10%	10	20%
Other (please specify)	2	4%	12	24%
Overseeing a department or grade level	12	24%	6	12%

Not only were assistant principals asked what job responsibilities they were tasked with pre-and post-COVID, but they were also asked which duties were the most time-consuming.

Table 4 depicts the assistant principals' responses to what duties consumed most of their time.

Out of the 52 participants who answered this question, it appears that pre-COVID discipline was the most time-consuming responsibility, which coincides with the research mentioned in the literature review. When looking at the post-COVID data, there was a decrease in discipline and teacher evaluations. However, attendance consumed more time along with “Other,” where participants noted their time consumed by monitoring COVID safety protocols, such as contact tracing and mask mandates.

During the transition from pre-COVID to post-COVID, many aspects of education were changed. Administrators frequently visited classrooms in person before COVID and then post-COVID, they limited their time in the classroom due to social distancing protocols and limiting exposure. Some administrators even felt that “classroom visits were nonexistent.” AP 2 even went to say, “So this past year, I don't think I stepped into a classroom one time. I was the COVID administrator, so I was contact tracing. That was my number one time-consuming thing this past year.”

When administrators were visiting classrooms, not only were they visiting in-person classes, but they were also logging in remotely to observe virtual instruction. AP 5 described their COVID experience as follows:

During COVID, I would say 90% was stuff, discipline, business of school, 10% (maybe less) was instructional related. I did not have a choice. So, 10% could be directly tied to PLC meetings which occurred either virtual, or we would go sit in a room, and we're all 15 feet away from each other, and if we're closer, it could only be for 15 minutes. I was only able to be in classrooms a cumulative amount at a time of 15 minutes. So, in the course of a week, if I came into your classroom and spent 3 minutes on day one and then 7 minutes on day two, I could only be there for 5 minutes on days 3, 4, and 5. And so,

like what am I going to do? So, I focus, we focused a lot of our time on quarantine procedures and protocols and that sort of thing. And I felt restricted and that I didn't, even if I wanted to, do different things in instruction. We weren't allowed or weren't able to.

While classroom visits shifted to the virtual setting, PLCs and department meetings also shifted to virtual, along with teacher appraisals. COVID "took away the ability to really meet with your department with everybody face-to-face in one room. That all changed to the virtual setting." Educators were spending hours each day on virtual calls to eliminate possible exposure.

Attendance monitoring shifted from monitoring students at school to monitoring if students logged in remotely from home. If not, administrators found themselves doing routine home visits to check in with kids. Teacher attendance also was a struggle as students and adults were required to quarantine when deemed a close contact. This often left classrooms without teachers or administrators filling in because finding substitutes was nearly impossible. "COVID in the fall hit us so badly, we didn't have to close down, but staffing-wise was a nightmare. What that meant was it was me literally setting things up every morning, checking on subs. We were subbing. We subbed a lot."

With all of the challenges and unknown, administrators found themselves doing anything to survive. AP 5 stated:

We didn't push. We didn't have any urgency behind us. This is important. This learning is important. We didn't do any pushing. And to me, that was the biggest impact. We just got in the pool and treaded water together. And that's what we needed to do, not to lose any more great educators that we're going to lose anyway because the job is so difficult, and the elements they found fulfilling were no longer there. And so, they just bounced.

So, to me, that was the biggest impact. The loss of the ability to hold teachers accountable for all the instruction.

During the interviews, assistant principals continued to mention how exhausted they were and how they felt defeated. With all of the new COVID guidelines, this was not the job they had initially signed up for, but they continued to push through. When answering, several of the assistant principals would get very emotional, AP 6 even saying:

It was the first time in my career that I felt a little defeated. I don't know why I'm getting emotional about that, but I felt defeated. I mean, I've said multiple times that I'm a teacher at heart. I love academics. I love knowledge. I love learning. And it felt like we weren't doing that, and the conversations took a really weird shift when we would go to our team meetings. It took a shift of, so who's not showing up on Zoom? Okay, well, let me call them, or hey, I'm going to come into your Zoom. But those conversations weren't about school. It was, well I can't, I can't come, you know because our grandparents are here and I really miss my friends, and I was like, hey, do you want me to talk to your parents to tell them that it's safe? Well, I don't think they're going to change their mind. You know, just seeing the sadness. I'm not going to lie; that was hard. So, I think even all the way for sure through January, it felt like we didn't even really have many conversations that looked anything like before, and we would go home, well I would, I'd go home exhausted.

Amid a pandemic and an unprecedented school year, assistant principals did the only thing they knew how to do, and that was to survive.

Post-COVID

After schools closed in March 2020 and reopened in August 2020 due to COVID, assistant principals' new normal included learning and creating safety protocols, transitioning from in-person to virtual learning, and navigating the chaos.

COVID Safety

As schools prepared for students to return to school, health safety protocols became the priority. School administrators created plans to enforce mask-wearing, social distancing, contact tracing, quarantine procedures, and even more extreme, remote learning options. As administrators reflected on the 2020-2021 school year, several mentioned the challenges they faced to ensure safety throughout the school. AP 6 described the experience as follows:

I think that initially, it felt like a major change. Initially, it was, oh my gosh, every Monday, we have to do these screeners the moment you walk in. Who didn't fill out the screener? Let's go take temperatures. And oh goodness, let's make sure we're talking to parents that were nervous that the desks weren't 6 feet apart and it was just a mad dash every day. It was partnering with our nurse, it felt like on a daily basis, to who's got COVID? Who is quarantined? How do we talk to parents because they're really upset that their kid is out for two weeks? And I felt like that absolutely took over.

When the assistant principals reflected on all the COVID protocols, there was exhaustion in their voices. "That became our duty, and it took away from us being instructional leaders." "We focused a lot of our time on quarantine procedures and protocols. And I felt restricted in that I didn't, even if I wanted to, do different things in instruction, we weren't allowed or weren't able to." They expressed how hard the year was as they had to overcome new obstacles regularly. "Logistically, when I think about it, it's like a lifetime ago. We made it work, but it was

constantly what was the new COVID issue today.” They expressed how they felt disconnected from their staff and students because of the safety protocols they had to follow. AP 6 described their year below:

The beginning was really hard. I’ll just say that. And it took you away, and everything was about pandemic and safety and masks, and oh my gosh, I ran out of hand sanitizer, and there were teachers that didn't want to show that they were afraid. They were afraid, and so you’re trying to support them, and you know, it was just this huge disconnect.

With abrupt school closures, assistant principals went from being instructional leaders to becoming health and safety monitors.

Changes in Instructional Leadership

Not only did COVID impact how students were learning, but it also impacted how assistant principals enacted instructional leadership. During the survey, assistant principals were asked to what extent they considered each aspect of their job a component of instructional leadership. Table 5 summarizes the assistant principals’ reflections pre- and post-COVID. To summarize Table 5, assistant principals strongly felt that teacher evaluations, hiring and retention of teachers and staff, Special Education ARDs/IEP meetings, 504 meetings, PLCs, faculty meetings, master schedule, and professional learning/development days were components of pre-COVID instructional leadership. Assistant principals also shared that they felt school safety drills/emergency procedures, extracurricular events, overseeing transportation/parking, and overseeing clubs/organizations were not components of instructional leadership. Assistant principals post-COVID duties suggest they felt teacher evaluations, hiring and retention of teachers and staff, professional learning communities, and professional learning days were less a component of instructional leadership while tending to a pandemic condition.

Table 5

Assistant Principal Perception: Instructional Leadership Components Pre- and Post-COVID

#		Pre-COVID		Post-COVID	
		Yes	No	Yes	No
1	Attendance	63%	37%	64%	36%
2	Discipline	67%	33%	44%	56%
3	Teacher Evaluations	100%	0%	86%	14%
4	Hiring and retention of teachers and staff	100%	0%	80%	20%
5	State testing	72%	28%	44%	56%
6	Special Education ARDs/IEP Meetings	90%	10%	86%	14%
7	504 Meetings	84%	16%	82%	18%
8	School safety drills/Emergency procedures	24%	76%	25%	75%
9	Professional Learning Communities	100%	0%	93%	7%
10	Faculty Meetings	91%	9%	74%	26%
11	Extracurricular events (administrator on duty)	18%	83%	15%	85%
12	Master schedule	84%	16%	89%	11%
13	Distributing textbooks	33%	67%	6%	94%
14	Overseeing transportation/parking	12%	88%	5%	95%
15	Professional learning/development days	100%	0%	83%	17%
16	Response to Intervention Coordinator	93%	7%	81%	19%
17	Overseeing substitutes	41%	59%	65%	35%
18	Overseeing clubs/organizations	22%	78%	19%	81%
19	Overseeing technology	60%	40%	92%	8%

These data suggest a shift in perceptions of instructional leadership pre- and post-COVID. There was also an increase in the importance of overseeing technology and overseeing substitutes, and a decrease in discipline as the focus on instruction shifted due to the changing needs of the school environment.

The data provided from the survey helped shape the interview protocol in phase two of the study. The survey data highlighted changes in roles and responsibilities, time consumption, and perceptions of assistant principals pre- and post-COVID.

Whether schools shifted to a hybrid model or offered remote and in-person classes separately, schools all over faced the challenges of providing instruction during an unprecedented year, with protocols constantly changing as different regulations were enforced.

As teachers and students balanced the new COVID “normal,” administrators found themselves exploring a new vision of instructional leadership. Many assistant principals expressed the difficulty of getting into classrooms due to contact tracing and not staying in classrooms for longer than 15 minutes at a time. They also grew in their instructional technology skills as they troubleshoot online learning and laptop issues. Some administrators felt that they lost the rigor in the classrooms and moved towards monitoring completion and pass/fail percentages to give students grace if they were quarantined due to being a close contact or testing positive for COVID. During the interview, AP 9 sorted through their thoughts and feelings as an instructional leader:

You really had to have a broader picture and understanding of what did we really want to focus on? Did we want to focus more on the kid? Did we want to focus more on the social-emotional well-being of the kid? Or what did we really want to focus on? And I think that was the most difficult part. It was like you were trying to redefine what an instructional leader actually looked like during this time because I felt like what we were wanting to do was just, “Hey, there are all these resources that are available to you, find one and make it work for you,” you know? It was difficult for me to be in my position and tell them, hey, you have to use this resource because that's what's going to work. I had no idea what was going to work, so it was find one of these that's going to be good for you, and it's going to keep you sane, and it's not going to make you extremely stressed by the time September hits and see if it works for you and if it doesn't, guess what, move on to the next one. It was more of a supportive role, to be honest with you. How can I make some of these things easier for you so that you can serve your kids?

AP 7 explained similar feelings and described the struggle of building new systems while implementing the systems.

It's more challenging, and that's the biggest thing is from the coaching perspective this year, you know my thing was, I think so many of us, districts included, were so behind on that knowledge base, that we were all trying to catch up as quickly as possible. So, what I found was I was trying to help teachers balance the hybrid when I was trying to learn the hybrid myself. So, trying to teach them while I'm trying to learn it myself. And that's challenging, I mean. You know, as I said in an earlier answer, I think it's beneficial for instructional leaders to always be going to trainings and be learning something so that we're ahead of the curve and we were not. We were in the curve with the teachers this year. It was really challenging. I think we shifted our perspective more from trying to help from an instructional leader standpoint and became a little bit more of a counselor, just to help and listen and show that we'd understand and show some grace and patience but holding that standard, that listen this is where we're at, but we still have to be teaching students. They still have to learn.

Between the assistant principals, there were feelings of not being instructional leaders at all, to learning how to be instructional leaders in a new environment. One assistant principal felt like what they knew as instructional leadership previously was no longer existent. AP 4 explained:

Instructional leadership- it went away. It hid behind the screen. It was like clicking bubbles. It became more of a quantity than a quality, especially for walkthroughs. How many walkthroughs can you get in? Because at times when you went into a classroom, teachers are just talking to a blank screen but not moving around because of what you're

asking them to do. But did we give different tools? Yeah. I mean, we gave them Peardeck. We gave them Google forms, how to do different things to make your classroom livelier. I think for instructional leadership, it just changed to more of management.

While many assistant principals expressed similar feelings of just managing all the COVID protocols, most of them described their instructional leadership changing from focusing on instruction to focusing on the social-emotional health of both teachers and students. AP 5 said:

But really, it was like trying to figure out what do you need to make yourself not quit. And then having some semblance of this in a classroom environment in which you feel like kids are learning and reconnecting with them. I wasn't ever really going in looking for evidence of anything that would exist on like an evaluative number. Sadly, I think at the cost of those kids' education, but I wasn't sure what else to do. There weren't any instructions about that either.

AP 3 said:

I feel like a lot of this year, we were being encouraged to focus on social-emotional learning and not just of our students, but of our teachers and how to support them, and so I think it was challenging for instructional leadership from my perspective because on the one hand, it's a very challenging year for teachers and students. However, on the other hand, we still have an important job to do, and so how do you balance that need to support the mental-emotional health of teachers and students but also still kind of remember that we want to make some growth and some gains. So, I think just focusing on some growth and some gains kind of became the focus instead of trying to push to

what we were used to because you weren't seeing it. Like our scores were 10, 15, 20% lower than they normally were, and I think a lot of people are saying that's because of the COVID slide, but also you had quarantined teachers and quarantined students. There was a lot of challenges there, so I think that was a big thing, just being able to shift from what you always expected in your scores and that historical data to how are we supposed to support growth in general as well as looking out for the mental and emotional health of teachers and students.

As assistant principals tried to focus on instruction when possible during an already hectic year, it was not surprising when their perceptions of themselves as instructional leaders decreased from pre-COVID to post-COVID. Survey items asked assistant principals to reflect on how they perceived themselves as instructional leaders pre-COVID (Figure 5) and how that perception changed post-COVID (Figure 6). It is evident in the visuals below that assistant principals felt less like instructional leaders during the 2020-2021 school year than they did before COVID.

Figure 5

Pre-COVID: Assistant Principals Perceptions as an Instructional Leader

4%	15%	17%	38%	25%
Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Mostly	Always

Figure 6

Post-COVID: Assistant Principals Perceptions as an Instructional Leader

13%	16%	24%	29%	18%
Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Mostly	Always

Remote Learning

Since many students and educators spent time in a remote setting during the 2020-2021 pandemic year, it was vital to explore the perceptions of assistant principals in the virtual setting. When AP 2 was asked how instructional leadership changed, she said, “Dramatically! I pretty much switched from being an instructional leader inside the classroom to being an instructional leader outside the classroom, so virtually.” With students and families having the option to switch back and forth from remote to in person, especially as students were quarantined, remote teaching became the instructional focus. Although technology has made its way into schools over the past decade, providing purely virtual instruction was not the norm pre-COVID.

Administrators were forced to go into virtual classrooms and conduct observations with little to no training. Pedagogy looked completely different in a virtual setting. AP 5 described their remote observation experience as follows:

So, the very first T-TESS observation I had to do this last school year, I made sure that it was a remote teacher in a remote section because I just wanted to figure out how am I going to provide support to this teacher and we did it early on. And the complicated part of it is that a lot of the stuff you could have evaluated was not visible to the observer. So, the teacher, maybe on Zoom, has a chat dialogue open up with these kids, or they private message each other, like there may be really rigorous conversations occurring, and I’d have no idea. And so, you can judge their delivery and look for alignment, but truly looking for those opportunities of how do we small group, how do we address specific individual student needs, and design intervention for those are really difficult to identify. And so, from the remote perspective, I think that we were truly looking for just ways to support teachers just through like what do you need to make this happen?

AP 7 similarly described their experience but observed hybrid teaching, meaning the teacher was teaching students in-person and virtually simultaneously. He said:

Many times, I would go into the classroom and be on the WebEx in the classroom so that I could kind of see those two perspectives and see also how students are reacting virtually when they're remote but then understand what's being said or what's being talked about. There was so much of a gap that I saw because many teachers didn't understand how to include everybody within the discussion. Many times, they'd be speaking right to students that were in front of them but not paying any attention to the students on the WebEx. And I think that was a problem because I think you need to make sure there's some equity with regards to the instruction so that everyone's getting what they need if that's possible in the situation that we are in. It's given me a better perspective on virtual learning, and I think that's been, it's been very intriguing for me.

Overall, the assistant principals consistently shared that they enjoyed putting themselves in the kids' perspective as they went into virtual classrooms, but it was still the unknown. During the interviews, AP 6 described their experience and the fear of the unknown:

When all of this first started, because it was such the unknown, none of us knew what would work. I mean, nobody did in the whole world. Again, I don't know what this looked like in other districts, and it is no fault to anyone, but the delivery of what it was supposed to look like actually created a lot of fear. Oh my gosh, I have to stand in only one spot. I can't move around the room because then the Zoom kids can't see me, and oh my gosh, they are not going to be able to see the board. And do I not need to put stuff up. It was the most fear-driven way to teach. It was weird. Well, when we started getting into the classes on Zoom, it made a better conversation of you can walk around, we can hear

you just fine. You know, you don't have to get away from that, and you know, it's okay that the kiddos don't see you all 45 minutes on the camera because you know what, if you were in class and you started walking around, they're not turning all the way around to see you, they're not doing that.

Although assistant principals made every effort to get into the virtual classrooms when they did, they did not feel as if they were serving as instructional leaders but were just supporting the teacher and learning along the way. It was almost as if everything they knew about being an instructional leader was nonexistent in a virtual setting. AP 3 described their remote experience as follows:

When I would observe teachers, it was very hard to give feedback. I hadn't really been trained on giving virtual feedback, and even though there was a T-TESS virtual rubric provided, it's very difficult. After all, your teachers were constantly having to adjust to figure out how to capture that formative assessment, how to capture that student engagement because you have teachers that were so enthusiastic. I was impressed that they maintained their energy when you literally have seen hardly any faces, maybe one, and your students even when and then they don't, they rarely type into the chat, and so it was really hard to kind of observe those metrics. I was just so impressed that they were trying to maintain that enthusiasm and energy about their subject, and they literally got no response. But as an instructional leader, I don't think I did a good job at all with remote teachers.

In a time of chaos, educators all over the nation shifted their practices to meet the safety needs of students, even to include providing instruction to students in the comfort of their own homes.

Chaos Theory and COVID

As schools all over the country adapted to COVID protocols, remote or hybrid teaching, and the unknowns with little to no preparation, chaos ensued. According to chaos theory, systems try to reach a state of equilibrium. Different attractors become prevalent during the chaos, either prompting a lasting change in one or more aspects of the organization or relenting and returning to the status quo. When reflecting on the changes that COVID brought about and the assistant principals' perceptions, it is too early to determine how and if schools will permanently change due to the chaos brought by COVID. One reason is that we are still in the middle of the pandemic, so schools have not had a chance to settle ultimately. Although this study did not determine the final changes after the COVID chaos, some attractors were identified when surveying and interviewing the participants. Those attractors include increasing grace and understanding while navigating survival mode and instructional leadership and the increased use of technology and learning management platforms. With an increase in new attractors, old attractors, such as instructional leadership, faded during the 2020-2021 school year.

Survival Mode

When assistant principals were asked to reflect on the 2020-2021 school year, they unanimously mentioned the term "survival." AP 1 said, "I also feel like with teachers this year, there were so many other things to worry about that it was almost like survival mode all year is what it felt like." AP 3 described their experience as "then COVID happened, and so from that, everything before us was remote, and it was weird because no one really knew what to do with remote, so it was kind of like a haphazard journey for teachers and students." It was not uncommon for the assistant principals to express their feelings of the unknown with one even

saying “the teachers didn't know their expectations, but we didn't know their expectations either.”

Overall, the assistant principals were united in the feeling of “how can we make sure we can do the best we can with what we got.” As the assistant principals were interviewed at the end of the 2020-2021 school year, there was a sign of relief that the year was over. “I mean, if we had this conversation last August, we would have still been talking about I'll give it three to six weeks, and here we are a year later, and we finished and made it work for a whole school year.” Not only did assistant principals mention survival overall when reflecting on the year, but they also mentioned “survival” specifically when reflecting on their instructional leadership practices.

Instructional Leadership

As instructional leadership looked different than ever before, assistant principals expressed that instructional leadership was not the priority during the 2020-2021 school year. It was more about supporting teachers and surviving. AP 2 described their role as a COVID administrator below:

The main thing that I learned is that I don't know why they thought it was a good idea to put the assistant principals as the COVID administrators because that took up all of our time. Having the assistant principal complete all of the contact tracings and call all the parents to come to get their kids and send out the letters was a big task, and I don't think they really thought, oh, they can do that on top of their other duties. That became our duty, and it took away from us being instructional leaders. I don't know if that was the intent like oh, we're not as concerned about you being an instructional leader this year because we know there's going to be learning gaps, we know that there is going to be a lot of back and forth you know because they're being quarantined. Then they are going to

go virtual, and they are going to come back in person, and then they'll go back virtual. I think their expectations were lower; maybe that's why they said we will have the assistant principals take on that role.

AP 10's takeaway as an instructional leader was also more about survival. He said:

I think the biggest thing that I have taken away from this is that you really, as an administrator, when you're evaluating teachers, especially in high-stress situations, is what you don't do, is you don't bury them. What you do is you take your time, and you keep things in perspective. What's really important at that particular juncture was to try to get everybody through the wilderness and being difficult, trying to turn a 30-year journey into a three-day journey and get us through it without having to lose people, people get frustrated and quit, and we had that, and that causes more stress on everybody else. It's just trying to keep the whole tribe together and get it from point A to point B, surviving. It was more survival mode than anything else.

As assistant principals continued to describe their experiences, it was evident that they never lost hope and continued to show up every day. However, every instructional decision they made was about grace. AP 8 described their experience below:

I would say I've had to be much more patient and give a lot more grace when it comes to things because I can't go into things thinking that, well, you know you should just do it like this, or this should just be easy when it may not be easy, or there might be a technological hang-up that keeps that from happening. So, it's trying to be patient and graceful enough to turn around and continue juggling without showing a lot of emotion and frustration on your face and then addressing it in such a way that you're supporting

and helping students even though you're getting mauled by tigers and bears on all sides.

That is what it feels like.

While not all aspects of COVID were negative, many assistant principals expressed their gratefulness for the increased use of technology.

Technology

Through the rapid change from in-person to remote, schools had to deliver content and curriculum virtually swiftly. Although technology usage was prevalent in most schools, schools were not prepared to replace the traditional school setting with a virtual school. Schools quickly jumped into utilizing technology and learning management platforms to deliver instruction to students, whether in person or remotely. Although COVID was the main reason these platforms were pushed out, many assistant principals voiced that they did not see them leaving the education arena once the pandemic was over. AP 7 reflected on the past year and the use of technology by saying:

I think the implementation of a learning management system, such as Canvas, was needed with how robust it is, and I think I would keep that. I'm glad we are keeping that.

I think there's a benefit in that as long as it's used correctly. You know whether every once in a while, I don't agree with doing a flipped classroom every day, but if you want to do some certain things outside the classroom through Canvas, so that when the kids come into class, that they're more ahead of that and that you can jump into more being a facilitator rather than a direct instruction type of teacher. I think we need to keep those practices; you know, the learning management system.

Although it is too soon to draw any conclusions around the effects of COVID on schools, it is apparent that even though the 2020-2021 school year was tough and not always focused on instruction, educators did the best they could to serve kids.

Study Conclusions

The interview and survey data from this study were closely aligned, with participants expressing similar responses throughout the study. Within this study, it was evident that assistant principals struggled to define instructional leadership, but instructional leadership centered around supporting teachers and students once they could verbalize their thoughts. When assistant principals were asked to describe how instructional leadership is enacted throughout their jobs, most assistant principals described their role of supporting teachers as visiting classrooms and participating in PLCs. When comparing the participants' responses to the Wallace Foundation (2013) instructional leadership model, assistant principals referred to several aspects of the different domains, including creating a safe climate, shaping a vision for students, improving instruction, and managing people, but cultivating leadership was never addressed.

During the study, it was clear that assistant principals strive to be instructional leaders, but their challenges often kept them from focusing on instructional leadership. Those who were able to focus on instructional leadership mentioned the role and influence of their campus principal and peer support. Even though some felt more effective as instructional leaders, all assistant principals described their job as putting out fires while managing their time, district expectations, and community expectations.

While COVID-19 provided more obstacles for school leaders, administrators found themselves in survival mode during the 2020-2021 school year, often shifting their focus from instruction to building relationships and focusing on safety protocols. As the chaos persisted,

remote learning became a new normal that educators and students adjusted to while building systems at the same time of implementation. Although it is too early to determine the final effects of COVID on the school system, it is apparent that assistant principals have felt the impacts of the pandemic throughout the school, from struggling learners to educators leaving the profession.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

The job of the assistant principal is demanding, stressful, and complex. Assistant principals are often responsible for the instructional atmosphere on campus, but they spend most of their time triaging all the other problems throughout the day. This study focused on the perceptions of assistant principals and how instructional leadership is defined and enacted. This study also explored the lived experiences of assistant principals as they navigated through the worldwide pandemic, COVID. Having provided an in-depth look into assistant principals' perceptions as instructional leaders, several areas should be addressed to support these critical leaders at the campus and district levels. The findings of this study also lead to many other potential studies, especially around the relationship between the assistant principal and campus principal and the long-term effects of COVID.

Considerations

This study was conducted to explore the perceptions of assistant principals as instructional leaders, pre-and post-COVID. A sequential explanatory mixed-methods design was used to examine how assistant principals define and enact their work as instructional leaders and explore their lived experiences throughout a pandemic. The quantitative results from 59 assistant principals' responses to an online survey were gathered to inform the development of questions used for in-depth interviews with ten assistant principals.

The results of this study can be used to inform campus-level administrators, district-level administrators, and principal preparation program developers to better understand the perceptions of assistant principals and their professional learning needs. As school leaders continue to serve a critical role in enhancing student learning, the insight from this study is

valuable for those responsible for providing support and guidance to assistant principals.

Common themes that emerged from this study include the following:

- 1) There is a lack of professional development intentionally designed for assistant principals;
- 2) There is a need for mentorship/modeling opportunities for assistant principals to receive support; and,
- 3) There is a need to review and evaluate the responsibilities given to assistant principals to protect the role as primary instructional leaders.

The conceptual framework that guided this study came from an intensive review of the literature related to instructional leadership and the role of assistant principals. Chaos theory was also used to help understand how organizations are affected when a crisis occurs and how this relates to schools as they sought equilibrium during the COVID pandemic. The recommendations made in this chapter are based upon the findings that emerged from the survey and interviews, along with the literature reviewed.

With the literature often focused on the role of principals as instructional leaders, this study gave voice to assistant principals and an opportunity for them to share their experiences (Horng & Loeb, 2010; Lutrick & Szabo, 2012; Oleszewski et al., 2012; Searby et al., 2017; Taylor Backor & Gordon, 2015). Findings for the present study suggest that whether there is a worldwide pandemic occurring or not, school administrators are overloaded with duties and responsibilities, often taking their focus away from instructional leadership. For assistant principals to focus on instructional leadership, they must be permitted to prioritize their responsibilities to serve students and teachers best. Campus principals and district leaders must set expectations for assistant principals to manage their time by focusing on instruction, not just

when there is time leftover in their schedules, but as the priority. For assistant principals to know how to define and enact instructional leadership, they must be provided the appropriate training and mentorship to feel adequate as instructional leaders. This means that when preparing assistant principals, there must be a focus on the role as an assistant principal. There must be intentional conversations around defining instructional leadership and how the role of assistant principal enacts this responsibility daily.

The survey results and the stories shared by the assistant principals during the interviews provided a lens through which those outside of the position of an assistant principal can better understand the life of assistant principals, including their struggles during a pandemic. With literature often focusing on the role of principals as instructional leaders, this study provided an opportunity for assistant principals to share their voice and their experiences. The survey responses and the rich, thick descriptions shared by the assistant principals answered the three research questions, providing insight on ways to better support assistant principals as instructional leaders. The results of this study are essential for those who lead, teach, and mentor assistant principals, whether it is at the campus level, the district level, or within principal preparation programs.

Study Recommendations

The findings in this study indicated that assistant principals crave intentional professional development opportunities to become better instructional leaders. The findings also indicate that assistant principals struggle to balance all of the responsibilities they are tasked with by their campus principals and district administration. To better support assistant principals, campus principals and district administrators must understand ways to support their campus leaders better and provide them with opportunities to grow. It is also essential for principal preparation

programs to support the assistant principalship, not just the principalship, to feel prepared to enter and stay in the profession. The next three sections outline recommendations for campus principals, district administrators, and principal preparation programs.

Recommendations for Campus Principals

Campus principals have the authority and control to make decisions that are best for their campus, including the role of the assistant principal (Gurley et al., 2013; Hayes & Burkett, 2020; Uddin et al., 2020). Within the study findings, assistant principals alluded to how important it was to have the support of their campus principals to be effective instructional leaders. The complete overload of tasks and responsibilities often left assistant principals feeling ineffective. While assistant principals mentioned their role in visiting classrooms, supporting teachers, and participating in PLCs, there were also unmentioned instructional leadership domains. The assistant principals voiced the need for professional learning opportunities to grow as instructional leaders so they are equipped to lead instruction throughout the school, not just within the classrooms.

Supportive Positions

As assistant principals struggle to accomplish all they are tasked with, one way campus principals could promote the importance of instructional leadership in their schools is by removing or reducing duties and responsibilities from assistant principals that are not directly tied to instructional leadership (Neumerski, 2013; Uddin et al., 2020; Zuckerman et al., 2020). Assistant principals often feel pressure to complete managerial tasks first before focusing on the position's instructional aspects (Barnett et al., 2012; Hallinger & Murphy, 2013). Throughout the surveys and interviews, assistant principals continued to detail how multiple and competing responsibilities take them away from being instructional leaders. When asked what they would

change about their current role, the majority mentioned having support positions that would help relieve them of some of the noninstructional tasks. AP 9, in particular, said the following:

I'll tell you one thing if school systems really want their administrators to be true instructional leaders, they need to take away some of the time that's killed with being at duty or some things like that. Hire some people on the campus that will go take care of some of those things. Being in the cafeteria or being in the hallways or being at duties in the mornings or afternoons so that the administrators can really focus on what's happening in the classrooms. The discipline, that's not a problem. The meetings, the ARD meetings, the 504 meetings, all of that come with the position, but I think we lose too much time of our administrators by just being at duty because of a lack of personnel.

This removal of duties means that campus principals and district leaders must recognize tasks that can be given to supportive positions but do not need the time of an assistant principal. These tasks include but are not limited to monitoring lunch duty, overseeing textbooks, overseeing technology resources, and serving as the testing coordinator. By removing some of these mundane tasks, assistant principals would be allowed to spend more time focusing on instructional leadership. Removing mundane tasks during COVID would include contact tracing and monitoring safety protocols. These tasks alone took assistant principals away from the classrooms and limited the time they could support the instructional environment during a pandemic.

For campus principals to remove some of these tasks, they must first be aware of the time commitment these tasks require and have conversations about their current personnel. Questions that should be asked include:

- Are there positions within the campus that could be redesigned to help alleviate

some unnecessary stress from assistant principals?

- Are positions remaining the same because that is how it has always been?

With the support of district leaders, campus principals need to examine the element of time and how assistant principals are spending their day to complete what is assigned. As found in this study, assistant principals are not choosing to avoid the instructional leadership aspect of their job. However, they are finding it nearly impossible to let go of the other tasks that pull them away from supporting teachers and students in the classroom. The current system must be redesigned to support assistant principals better and allow them to live the role of instructional leader.

Professional Development

Assistant principals often learn the position during their first administrative assignment, meaning the campus principal is often responsible for preparing assistant principals to be instructional leaders (Allen & Weaver, 2014; Barnett et al., 2012; Brazer & Bauer, 2013; Gurley et al., 2015; Searby et al., 2017). Since assistant principals are learning while on the job, campus principals should work to provide assistant principals with the opportunity to participate in professional learning focused on instructional leadership, which may include visiting other campuses, facilitating book studies centered around instruction, attending conferences focused on instruction, leading learning walks, or actively participating in PLCs. There are also opportunities for campus principals to address other areas of instructional leadership, such as the following Wallace Foundation (2013) domains:

- Shaping a vision of academic success for all students, one based on high standards;

- Creating a climate hospitable to education so that safety, a cooperative spirit, and other foundation of fruitful interaction prevail;
- Cultivating leadership in others so that teachers and other adults assume their part in realizing the school vision;
- Improving instruction to enable teachers to teach at their best and students to learn at their utmost; and
- Managing people, data, and processes to foster school improvement (p. 6).

To prioritize the learning of assistant principals, campus principals must provide the time and space for assistant principals to grow. The literature demonstrates that assistant principals feel that they have not had proper training for the role and need ongoing support and professional development as the educational setting evolves (Allen & Weaver, 2014; Armstrong, 2009; Barnett et al., 2012; Brazer & Bauer, 2013). In this study, it was evident that assistant principals were not always clear how to define or enact instructional leadership. As found in the study, assistant principals did not describe their work as instructional leaders in building capacity or hiring and retaining teachers. These are areas outside of the classroom and PLCs that impact schools' success and must be at the center of conversations. Assistant principals need to clearly understand their expectations as instructional leaders and be given the freedom to manage their time and push back on responsibilities that may hinder their role as instructional leaders.

Part of the professional learning opportunity would be for assistant principals to observe their campus principals serving as instructional leaders. This could include participating in PLCs, leading learning walks, or leading campus professional development. This modeling is essential for assistant principals to see and understand that their campus leader also values instructional leadership. With the guidance of campus principals, assistant principals will grow as

instructional leaders if given the space. It is the responsibility of the campus principal to foster this growth and build a strong team while building capacity in each other. AP 9 shared a similar sentiment:

I think one of the most important things that an administrative team could do to make sure that everybody's on the same page is to do walkthroughs of the campus together so that they can really calibrate what they're wanting to see in the classroom. Obviously, with the principal's guidance of what he or she may want to see in the classroom. This is the type of teacher we want to see. This is the type of questioning that we want to see, and if everybody has an understanding of that, I think that makes everybody a better instructional leader. I don't know if there's anything that can be done at the district level that would improve that, but I think it starts at the campus. You know, as the campus, what are we wanting to see? How are we going to support a teacher that is not showing us what we see, and then how can we empower the people that are doing the things correctly so that they can make the rest of the campus better.

Recommendations for School District Administrators

Although campus principals are vital to shaping the work of assistant principals, district administrators are also responsible for providing support to assistant principals. When interviewing the assistant principals, they welcomed the opportunity to have a mentor to help learn the district expectations and to model the role of an instructional leader. The assistant principals alluded to having an assistant principal academy to help transition from their previous position to a new role, whether new to the position or just new to the district. The assistant principals also voiced concerns about the priorities of assistant principal meetings. They felt that the message of instructional leadership being a priority did not align with the meetings' agendas.

Mentorship/Modeling

The first recommendation for school district administrators is to provide a mentorship program for all new assistant principals in the district, not just first-year assistant principals (Allen & Weaver, 2014; Barnett et al., 2017). A mentor program is crucial when developing the skills necessary for new school leaders to be effective (Daresh, 2004). Since each district operates differently, it is crucial for veteran assistant principals to feel supported when moving to a new district due to a lack of institutional knowledge. Within a mentorship program, assistant principals would be assigned to an administrator at another campus to build relationships and have a support system as they navigate their new roles. For a mentor program to succeed, the mentor and mentee must be appropriately matched (Mendels, 2012). It would be valuable for this mentor to have assistant principal experience and be a safe outlet for support.

Along with having a mentor, the district must set clear expectations for the campus principal to model instructional leadership to their assistant principals. This means that campus principals need to be just as involved in instruction at the campus level and take time to facilitate conversations with their campus leaders to ensure that they adhere to the campus's vision and mission, but this must be an expectation set by the district administrators. As AP 7 stated:

It should be a trickle-down effect. It should be the principal not only passing the message of the mission and vision of what we're trying to accomplish at the campus level but that person should be immersed in that instructional leadership. That person should be in classrooms. That person should ensure that their assistant principals are also in classrooms and make that a priority.

When asked about district-level support, AP 10 said:

I wish they would practice what they preach. If they're going to have me read *The Power of Positive Leadership*, but you're not very positive, I don't know how to turn around and really work that. Be what it is that you want. Be the change that you want to see in the world like Gandhi says. If you want people to be a certain way, you have to model it. Modeling is important. If I've been in the district for 23 years and I have not done a gallery walk with all the other Educational Directors or anything like that, what am I actually gaining? There has to be a time for them to come down and say, "Hey, I'm here to grow you." I have yet to hear that as an AP from anyone other than the principal that I have now.

When the district and campus principal's expectations align and they model the expectation, the message to the assistant principals is clear that instruction is a priority. Although campus principals are the primary support for assistant principals, the district's work must be aligned so there is clarity around expectations.

Professional Development/Training

In order to support assistant principals as instructional leaders, school district administrators need to provide quality professional development and training to all assistant principals throughout the year. Support from the district provides the opportunity for assistant principals to align their instructional leadership with other leaders across the district and learn from leaders outside of their campus. With several assistant principals feeling unprepared to be instructional leaders and undervalued in the position, the time and space are needed to receive professional development with their colleagues (Allen & Weaver, 2014; Barnett et al., 2012; Searby et al., 2017). AP 6 explained further:

The only thing I wish is that there was someone who would make a million dollars to actually truly train assistant principals to be assistant principals. There's no training. You just are thrown into it. And I do think that's pretty much every career, but I think that there are definitely some things that you're not taught in classes that would be beneficial to know. So, a true assistant principal academy for, you know, beginners. There is a part of me that man, I wish that I would have known this. I wish I would have been given a few more tools in my tool belt because you're just thrown to the fire, and I will say that and follow it by saying, but that's also why only certain people can be leaders. You got to be thrown in the fire and figure it out, but man, if there were like some million-dollar training, I'd be down for that.

One way to provide support to assistant principals is to have a new assistant principal academy where the new leaders can grow with other new leaders while learning the district's expectations (Searby et al., 2017). AP 2 described their experience with the assistant principal academy as follows:

We called it Assistant Principal Academy, and we tried to meet twice a semester, and sometimes they were led by the superintendent or the assistant superintendent or curriculum just depending on what they wanted us to focus on. Always at the end, we would have a roundtable of what are some things that we are struggling with that maybe we can work on for our next meeting and roundtable everything as secondary assistant principals. And that was working well.

If districts provided an opportunity for assistant principals to collaborate with other assistant principals, it could help assistant principals feel valued and help them validate their concerns knowing they are not experiencing the struggle alone (Armstrong, 2009; Morgan, 2018).

Another opportunity would be for district leaders to be intentional about how time is spent during assistant principal meetings. When the assistant principals were asked about the value of their district assistant principal meetings during the interviews, many voiced that they did not find them helpful and that they did not focus on instructional leadership. AP 7 said:

I think the focus needs to be put on APs as instructional leaders. I have rarely, in the entire time I've been in this district, heard assistant principal and instructional leader within the same context. It's not even a perspective. That's not even the way it's viewed. It's just assistant principal, and then when you go to a meeting, it's all these tasks. Or hey, we want to get your input on how we're going to change this policy or something. There is very little focus or correlation, or connotation between assistant principal and instructional leader. So, I think that's the first and foremost, and then you truly have to make it intentional and say, "Hey, it's part of your job. I know we have a lot to do. Let's think about some of the things we might be able to take off your plate or spread around a little bit so we can be in classrooms more." I think that's so important, being in classrooms. That's the way you get it. That's the way you learn.

This brings up the following questions:

- Are district leaders intentional about communicating the importance of instructional leadership on campus, or is it only given time when there is a particular issue or time left over?
- How are walkthroughs and being present in classrooms enforced, and by being enforced, is it sending the wrong message?
- Has instructional leadership become more of a mandate and less of a priority?

One recommendation to help district leaders plan professional development for their assistant principals would be to have intentional conversations around instructional leadership and how it is defined and enacted (Celikten, 2001). When creating meeting agendas, is the focus on instructional leadership, or is the majority of the meeting spent on the other tasks? District leaders and assistant principals would benefit from examining the instructional leadership models presented in this study to determine how it is enacted within their district. District leaders need to be intentional and aware of what message they are sending to their campus leaders. Although there are tasks outside of instructional leadership that must be present for schools to operate, school leaders must not lose sight of the main focus: improving instruction by supporting teachers to benefit students.

Recommendations for Assistant Principal Certification Programs

Assistant principal support must be focused at the professional level and the training level. As aspiring assistant principals receive training while they pursue their administration certification, principal preparation programs must consider the needs of these particular campus leaders (Hallinger & Murphy, 2013; Oleszewski et al., 2012). Often the principal preparation programs focus on the role of the principal, and while it may be similar to the assistant principalship, there is a difference between the two. One of the main differences is the significant learning curve between going from a teacher to an assistant principal and then going from an assistant principal to a principal (Allen & Weaver, 2014; Searby et al., 2017). One way to help minimize the learning curve would be for principal preparation programs to provide an internship, allowing aspiring assistant principals the opportunity to learn the job at a lower risk. Also, with peer relationships found to be one of the most valuable supports for assistant

principals to be instructional leaders, principal preparation programs should consider designing their programs using a cohort model.

Cohort Model

One recommendation for assistant principal certification programs would be to organize the program using cohorts. Research by Davis and Darling-Hammond (2012) shows that participants in a cohort model benefit from working alongside their peers. Cohorts allow students to build relationships with colleagues and form connections that last well beyond the certification program. When administrators have a cohort of peers, they automatically have a support system when they enter their first administrative position. Without this support system, campus leaders are thrown into a position without having anyone to turn to externally. The cohort model allows students to share experiences with their peers throughout the program and dig deeper into the content due to relationships formed early within the process. This collegiality lasts throughout the career of the assistant principals, not just during the time of the program. During this study, it was evident which assistant principals found their principal preparation program more valuable. Throughout the interviews, assistant principals who experienced the cohort model credited part of their success to their certification program. AP 5 spoke about his experience in a cohort and said, “Over the course of ten years where these individuals work in different school districts are bonded in such a manner that they still maintain a relationship. They share information, they talk, lean on each other, so I think that's vital.” Meanwhile, those who did not experience the cohort model expressed that their certification program experience was more about completing activities and practicum hours and less about building a support system.

Internship

The second recommendation for assistant principal certification programs is to require an internship and observation/practicum hours. Research indicates that if new leaders are provided the opportunity to learn an assistant principal's job at lower risk through an internship, it better prepares the candidate to be an effective school leader (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Leithwood et al., 2012). Although this model requires funding and partnerships between the certification programs and school districts, those administrators who have experienced an internship have expressed how beneficial it was to learn an assistant principal's job while still having the program's support system. AP 1 described their experience in an internship as follows:

I just really was able to see every teacher just kind of informally and in the next year got trained on the T-TESS and kind of learned how to take all that knowledge and so maybe that helped just kind of having a slow introduction to being in a classroom as an observer and working with teachers in that capacity. It was just all informal my first year, like anything I was saying was like, "Hey, maybe you can do this." I couldn't do anything formally evaluative, or write-ups, or anything like that, so it was less of a risk.

The majority of the job of an assistant principal is learned while on the job, but if assistant principals are given an opportunity like teachers do when student teaching, this will help minimize the learning curve when thrown into the position. The internship also provides a safety net for new assistant principals to make mistakes and take risks while learning the job and receiving support from experienced assistant principals and principals.

While most preparation programs require participants to acquire observation hours in specific areas, many assistant principals have expressed how they have not felt like the checklist

of activities has genuinely prepared them to serve as assistant principals, especially as instructional leaders.

Implications for Future Research

The findings of this research lead to many new questions, some that have been studied, while others are yet to be explored. With the role of assistant principals as instructional leaders being understudied, there are future opportunities to explore how assistant principals define instructional leadership and how the principal role as instructional leader aligns with the role of assistant principal. Since COVID was still prevalent in schools at the time of this study, there are future opportunities to study the lasting changes in schools once the chaos ultimately settles.

Principal's Role as an Instructional Leader

While interviewing assistant principals and asking about their perceptions as instructional leaders, it would have been beneficial to interview their campus principal to determine if there is an alignment with instructional leadership values. This also would have been an excellent opportunity to understand better the principals' perceptions of their assistant principals and their work. The question for future researchers would be: How does the principal's perception of instructional leadership align to the assistant principal's perception?

It would also be beneficial to see how district leaders serve as instructional leaders and whether they genuinely dedicate time to grow campus assistant principals. Is this solely left up to the campus principal? Also, how do district leaders prepare professional development for assistant principals, and what thought process goes into designing meeting agendas focusing on instructional leadership? What content would assistant principals find valuable to be covered during assistant principal meetings?

Redefining Perceptions of Instructional Leadership

During this study, assistant principals struggled to define instructional leadership. When asked how they enact instructional leadership, assistant principals were able to provide examples, but often they did not incorporate all the domains of instructional leadership in their definition. One area that needs exploring is how assistant principals and other school leaders learn to define instructional leadership. Is the focus of instructional leadership only about being in classrooms and PLCs, and if not, why do assistant principals feel inadequate as instructional leaders? Why is it that when assistant principals were asked how they serve as instructional leaders, they mostly spoke of visiting classrooms and being present in PLCs, but yet all the models of instructional leadership include much more than that? Also, what should an assistant principal's instructional leadership look like when involved and participating in PLCs?

Another area to explore would be the use of assistant principal evaluations and how instructional leadership is evaluated. Do the evaluations of assistant principals align to serving as instructional leaders, and are the tasks assigned to them aligned with the district and campus expectations? What time is spent with assistant principals reviewing the expectations on how to serve as instructional leaders? Are assistant principals expected to serve as instructional leaders in all the given domains provided by the Wallace Foundation (2013), or is the only expectation communicated is to be involved in PLCs and visit classrooms?

Post-COVID

Due to the time of this study and the COVID pandemic still in full effect, it would be interesting to see how schools (d)evolve, especially as schools settle again. Will COVID have a long-term effect on how schools operate, including virtual instruction? Will the State of Texas continue to tie funding to attendance, and will attendance regulations look the same? What will

be the long-term impacts of COVID on students and teachers? Will there be significant learning gaps, and will there continue to be a shortage of educators?

With the continuation of COVID, virtual learning, and pandemic protocols, a research gap still exists after the completion of this study. To better understand the effects of COVID on schools, more studies will need to be conducted once the pandemic is over.

Conclusion

Assistant principals are a vital resource for the functioning of schools and the success of students. They dedicate time in their career to serving staff and students by providing space for students and teachers to grow. Although the role of the assistant principal as an instructional leader is often overlooked, without this vital position, campus and district leaders would struggle to serve those in their organization.

Assistant principals in this study articulated the need for positive influences from their campus and district leaders. They also articulated the importance of peer support and building relationships. Although most of the experiences of the assistant principalship position cannot be truly learned until on the job, there is value in preparing future assistant principals for the challenges they will face, including time management, extinguishing fires, and prioritizing instruction.

Even with the chaos of COVID, assistant principals' growth needs to be nurtured, and they need to be provided the opportunity to develop and build their own capacity as school leaders. This can only be done through intentional support, focused on the importance of the role of the assistant principal as an instructional leader.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Phase One Consent Form and Survey

Instructional Leadership: Perceptions of Assistant Principals Pre- and Post-COVID

Start of Block: Consent

Q1.1 Welcome to the *Instructional Leadership: Perceptions of Assistant Principals Pre- and Post-COVID Survey*.

The following provides information regarding our data collection methods and uses. When you have reviewed this information, please indicate your consent (and proceed to the survey) or decline participation by clicking the appropriate choice. You may also download a .pdf of this Study Information Sheet here:

[Study Information Sheet: Instructional Leadership: Perceptions of Assistant Principals Pre- and Post-COVID](#)

Title of Research: Instructional Leadership: Perceptions of Assistant Principals Pre- and Post-COVID

Principal Investigator: Jo Beth Jimerson, Ph.D. (TCU College of Education) Co-investigators: Jessica Ramos, TCU Ed.D. Candidate

What is the purpose of the research? The purpose of this study is to explore how the role of assistant principal shapes, reshapes, and influences the way campus administrators think about and enact instructional leadership and how the educational crisis brought about by COVID-19 has influenced the shape and scope of this work.

How many people will participate in this study? Secondary assistant principals in the ESC Region XI will be invited to participate in the survey. Of the approximately 600 assistant principals invite to participate, we estimate that between 100-200 assistant principals may eventually complete the survey.

What is my involvement for participating in this study? Your involvement includes participating in an electronic survey about your role as an assistant principal and as an instructional leader. You will be asked at the end of the survey if you would like to participate in an interview.

How long am I expected to be in this study for and how much of my time is required? If you decide to participate in the study, you will be asked to complete a single electronic survey. No follow up is required, but you will be asked if you would like to participate in an interview at the end of the survey. The electronic survey is designed to take approximately 15 minutes; this time may be shortened or extended depending on your answers to open-ended items.

What are the risks of participating in this study and how will they be minimized? The risks associated with this study are minimal. No identifiable information (e.g., names, school names, specific locations) will be collected in the survey. The survey system does use email addresses to enable invitations and reminders, but we will strip this element out of data sets prior to analysis,

and the link itself is anonymous. Beyond the research team, no one will be able to tell which assistant principals in the ESC XI area participated in the study. Should a participant choose to reveal personally identifying information in a survey response, or do so accidentally, that information will be redacted and/or replaced with a pseudonym to protect participants' identities.

What are the benefits for participating in this study? Participants will be able to reflect upon their own practices, which may serve to bring more awareness to their own practice. In addition, participants will provide practitioner knowledge that helps researchers better understand practices related to the assistant principal role. This knowledge can serve as a basis for further research that relates to instructional leadership and the role of the assistant principal.

Will I be compensated for participating in this study? There is no compensation for participants.

What is an alternate procedure(s) that I can choose instead of participating in this study? There is no alternate procedure for participation.

How will my confidentiality be protected? The surveys will not ask for any identifiable information in order to maintain confidentiality or responses. Responses will be collected securely via Qualtrics and only the researchers will have access to these data. Unless you opt to reveal personally identifying information in response to an item, the researchers will not be able to know who participated in the survey or match responses to individual participants.

Is my participation voluntary? Yes. Participation in this study is completely voluntary.

Can I stop taking part in this research? Yes. Participants may choose to stop and exit the survey entirely at any point up until the final item. Once a participant has clicked the final "Submit" button their responses will be used in the study.

What are the procedures for withdrawal? In order to withdraw, a participant need only exit the survey at any point prior to responding to the final survey item and that person's data will not be used in the study. However, once a participant has responded to the final item, the participant's responses will be used in the study.

Will I be given a copy of the consent document to keep? You may download a copy of the .pdf for this Study Information Sheet at the link indicated at the top of this page. You may also take a screenshot of this information. We will not collect a signed copy the act of clicking on the survey link and completing the survey will be accepted as consent to participate.

I consent to participate. Take me to the survey! (1)

I decline participation in this survey. (2)

Skip To: End of Survey If Welcome to the Instructional Leadership: Perceptions of Assistant Principals Pre- and Post-COVID... = I decline participation in this survey.

Q1 This survey explores perceptions of assistant principals around instructional leadership pre- and post-COVID.

To participate, you must meet some criteria related to your current employment context and experience. Please respond to the following questions to help us ascertain whether you qualify for the study parameters.

	Yes (1)	No (2)
Are you currently employed as an assistant principal? (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Were you an assistant principal during the 2019-2020 school year? (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Skip To: End of Block If This survey explores perceptions of assistant principals around instructional leadership pre- and... = Are you currently employed as an assistant principal? [No]

Skip To: End of Block If This survey explores perceptions of assistant principals around instructional leadership pre- and... = Were you an assistant principal during the 2019-2020 school year? [No]

End of Block: Consent

Start of Block: Pre-COVID

Q2 Thank you for your responses. Your responses qualify you for participation. Please continue on to the first survey item, and we thank you again for your willingness to share your valuable perspectives and ideas with us.

Q3 This first block of items inquires about your experience as an assistant principal **pre-COVID**.

In this study, pre-COVID is defined as the time period prior to March 2020 when schools were operating fully in-person.

When you respond to this block of items, please consider only your pre-COVID experiences; do not consider your current experiences since March 2020. Questions about your COVID experiences will be asked later in the survey.

Q4 What responsibilities were you assigned **pre-COVID**? Select all that apply.

- Attendance
- Discipline
- Teacher Evaluations
- Hiring and retention of teachers and staff
- State testing
- Special Education ARDs/IEP Meetings
- 504 Meetings
- School safety drills/Emergency procedures
- Professional Learning Communities
- Faculty Meetings
- Extracurricular events (administrator on duty)
- Master schedule
- Distributing textbooks
- Overseeing transportation/parking
- Professional learning/development days
- Response to Intervention Coordinator
- Overseeing substitutes
- Overseeing clubs/organizations
- Overseeing technology
- Overseeing a department or grade level
- Other (please specify) _____

Q5 What responsibilities consumed most of your time **pre-COVID**? (Select the top 5)

- Attendance
- Discipline
- Teacher Evaluations
- Hiring and retention of teachers and staff
- State testing
- Special Education ARDs/IEP Meetings
- 504 Meetings
- School safety drills/Emergency procedures
- Professional Learning Communities
- Faculty Meetings
- Extracurricular events (administrator on duty)
- Master schedule
- Distributing textbooks
- Overseeing transportation/parking
- Professional learning/development days
- Response to Intervention Coordinator
- Overseeing substitutes
- Overseeing clubs/organizations
- Overseeing technology
- Overseeing a department or grade level
- Other (please specify) _____

Q6 Prior to COVID, to what degree did you see yourself as an "instructional leader" on your campus?

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	(4)	(5)	
To a very low degree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	To a very high degree

Q7 Pre-COVID, when you were acting as an instructional leader, what were you most typically doing/engaged in doing?

Q8 Reflecting on your job pre-COVID, to what extent do you consider each of the following aspects of your job a component of instructional leadership? (Definitely yes, probably yes, might or might not, probably not, definitely not, I did not do this)

- Attendance
- Discipline
- Teacher Evaluations
- Hiring and retention of teachers and staff
- State testing
- Special Education ARDs/IEP Meetings
- 504 Meetings
- School safety drills/Emergency procedures
- Professional Learning Communities
- Faculty Meetings
- Extracurricular events (administrator on duty)
- Master schedule
- Distributing textbooks
- Overseeing transportation/parking
- Professional learning/development days
- Response to Intervention Coordinator
- Overseeing substitutes
- Overseeing clubs/organizations
- Overseeing technology
- Overseeing a department or grade level

Q9 Thinking about your job/role **pre-COVID**, how frequently did the work you do support the following actions? (Almost never, Seldom, Sometimes, Frequently, Almost Always)

- Shape a vision of academic success for all students
- Create a climate hospitable to education
- Cultivate leadership in others
- Improve instruction
- Manage people, data, and processes to foster school improvement
- Serve as an instructional leader

End of Block: Pre-COVID

Start of Block: Post-COVID

This next block of items inquires about your experience as an assistant principal **post-COVID**.

In this study, post-COVID is defined as the time period after March 2020 when schools were closed due to the coronavirus and then reopened, including remote settings.

When you respond to this block of items, please consider only your post-COVID experiences; do not consider your previous experiences prior to March 2020.

Q10 What responsibilities have you been assigned **post-COVID**? Select all that apply.

- Attendance
- Discipline
- Teacher Evaluations
- Hiring and retention of teachers and staff
- State testing
- Special Education ARDs/IEP Meetings
- 504 Meetings
- School safety drills/Emergency procedures
- Professional Learning Communities
- Faculty Meetings
- Extracurricular events (administrator on duty)
- Master schedule
- Distributing textbooks
- Overseeing transportation/parking
- Professional learning/development days
- Response to Intervention Coordinator
- Overseeing substitutes
- Overseeing clubs/organizations
- Overseeing technology
- Overseeing a department or grade level
- Other (please specify) _____

Q11 What responsibilities have consumed most of your time **post-COVID**? (Select the top 5)

- Attendance
- Discipline
- Teacher Evaluations
- Hiring and retention of teachers and staff
- State testing
- Special Education ARDs/IEP Meetings
- 504 Meetings
- School safety drills/Emergency procedures
- Professional Learning Communities
- Faculty Meetings
- Extracurricular events (administrator on duty)
- Master schedule
- Distributing textbooks
- Overseeing transportation/parking
- Professional learning/development days
- Response to Intervention Coordinator
- Overseeing substitutes
- Overseeing clubs/organizations
- Overseeing technology
- Overseeing a department or grade level
- Other (please specify) _____

Q12 **Post-COVID**, to what degree do you see yourself as an "instructional leader" on your campus?

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	(4)	(5)	
To a very low degree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	To a very high degree

Q13 **Post-COVID**, when you act as an instructional leader, what are you most typically doing/engaged in doing?

Q14 Reflecting on your job **post-COVID**, to what extent do you believe each job task or responsibility is a facet of instructional leadership? (Definitely yes, probably yes, might or might not, probably not, definitely not, I did not do this)

- Attendance
- Discipline
- Teacher Evaluations
- Hiring and retention of teachers and staff
- State testing
- Special Education ARDs/IEP Meetings
- 504 Meetings
- School safety drills/Emergency procedures
- Professional Learning Communities
- Faculty Meetings
- Extracurricular events (administrator on duty)
- Master schedule
- Distributing textbooks
- Overseeing transportation/parking
- Professional learning/development days
- Response to Intervention Coordinator
- Overseeing substitutes
- Overseeing clubs/organizations
- Overseeing technology
- Overseeing a department or grade level

Q15 Thinking about your job/role post-COVID, how frequently does the work you do support the following actions? (Almost never, Seldom, Sometimes, Frequently, Almost Always)

- Shape a vision of academic success for all students
- Create a climate hospitable to education
- Cultivate leadership in others
- Improve instruction
- Manage people, data, and processes to foster school improvement
- Serve as an instructional leader

End of Block: Post-COVID

Start of Block: Other Instructional Leadership Questions

This next block of items inquires about your perspective as an assistant principal and an instructional leader.

Q16 Consider the following tasks/duties commonly associated with the AP role. Rate the degree to which you see the job/duty contributing to creating/sustaining effective systems for learning. (extremely useful, very useful, moderately useful, slightly useful)

- Attendance
 - Discipline
 - Teacher Evaluations
 - Hiring and retention of teachers and staff
 - State testing
 - Special Education ARDs/IEP Meetings
 - 504 Meetings
 - School safety drills/Emergency procedures
 - Professional Learning Communities
 - Faculty Meetings
 - Extracurricular events (administrator on duty)
 - Master schedule
 - Distributing textbooks
 - Overseeing transportation/parking
 - Professional learning/development days
 - Response to Intervention Coordinator
 - Overseeing substitutes
 - Overseeing clubs/organizations
 - Overseeing technology
 - Overseeing a department or grade level
-

Q17 How do you define "instructional leadership"?

Q18 How do you define your role as an instructional leader in an AP role?

Q19 How has your principal supported you as an instructional leader?

Q20 What hindered you or helped you be the instructional leader you desired to be post-COVID?

Q21 Since COVID, what tasks have received most of your attention?

Q22 Since COVID, are there tasks that you wish you could devote more attention to? If so, explain.

Q23 If you could change the role of the assistant principal, what would you change?

End of Block: Other Instructional Leadership Questions

Start of Block: School Demographics

In this block, please provide some demographic information about the school where you currently work.

Q24 What grade level(s) does your school serve? Mark all that apply.

- 5th
 - 6th
 - 7th
 - 8th
 - 9th
 - 10th
 - 11th
 - 12th
-

Q25 How large is your school?

- 0-499
 - 500-999
 - 1000-1499
 - 1500-1999
 - 2000+
-

End of Block: School Demographics

Start of Block: Individual Demographics

In this block, please provide some demographic and professional information about yourself.

Q26 How many years of experience (counting the current year) do you have in education?

- 1-5
 - 6-10
 - 11-15
 - 16-20
 - 21-25
 - 26-30
 - 31+
-

Q27 How many years have you been an assistant principal (counting the current year)?

- 1-5
 - 6-10
 - 11-15
 - 16-20
 - 21-25
 - 26-30
 - 31+
-

Q28 What is your gender?

- Man
- Woman
- Non-binary/third gender
- Prefer to self-describe
- Prefer not to say

Q29 Please select the racial/ethnic category that you identify with:

- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Bi/multi-racial
- Hispanic or Latino
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- White
- Self-describe: _____
- Prefer not to say

End of Block: Individual Demographics

Start of Block: Final Block

You have reached the end of the survey. We thank you for your time and efforts in providing your responses and perspective.

Would you be willing to participate in a 45-60 minute interview to discuss your role as an assistant principal and instructional leader further? (Answering "yes" will redirect you to another survey where you can input your contact data, so that we can keep your identity and survey responses separate).

Yes (1)

No (2)

End of Block: Final Block

Appendix B: Semi-structured Interview Questions

1. Describe your job to me. What are your responsibilities? (RQ1/2)
2. Can you walk me through a typical day? What do you do? (RQ1/2)
3. Turning more towards instruction, how do you define instructional leadership? (RQ1)
4. How do you serve as an instructional leader in your day-to-day activities? (RQ1/2)
5. What tasks get in the way of you being the instructional leader you wish you could be?
(RQ2)
6. In what ways does your job differ from the role of the principal? (RQ1)
7. In what ways has your instructional leadership changed through COVID-19? (RQ3)
8. How does the principal role define instructional leadership, and how is this different from the assistant principal's role? (RQ1)
9. How do assistant principals perceive themselves as instructional leaders? What duties demonstrate this leadership? (RQ1)
10. How does instructional leadership look like in the remote setting? (RQ3)
11. How do principals perceive assistant principals as instructional leaders? What duties demonstrate this leadership? (RQ1)
12. How is instructional leadership defined outside of the classroom, and how does it look?
(RQ1)
13. What supports or hinders assistant principals' efforts to engage in instructional leadership/function as instructional leaders? (RQ2)
14. What training/support was provided for assistant principals to shape their instructional leadership? (RQ1)
15. What prepared you to be an instructional leader on campus? (RQ1)

16. What are practices that you did prior to COVID-19 but no longer do? (RQ3)
17. If you could design the role of the assistant principal, what would you include or discard?
(RQ1/2)
18. If I told you that these four essential components define instructional leadership: setting direction, developing people, focusing on learning, improving the instructional program, would you consider yourself an instructional leader? Why or why not? (RQ1)
19. If I told you that these four essential components define instructional leadership: setting direction, developing people, focusing on learning, improving the instructional program, would you consider yourself an instructional leader? Why or why not?

Appendix C: Qualitative Descriptive Codes

- Instructional Leadership Defined
 - Classroom Visits
 - Supporting Teachers
 - Job Description
 - PLC
 - Emails/Phone Calls/Communication
 - Modeling
 - Duty
 - Meeting with Students
 - Attendance
 - Behavior
 - Assignment
 - Experience
 - Are you an Instructional Leader?
- Instructional Leadership Enacted
 - Hinders
 - Supports
 - Fires
 - Survival
 - Hijacked
 - Days are never the same
 - Limits- Time
 - District Administration
 - Supportive Positions
 - Testing/STAAR/LPAC
 - Supportive Positions
 - Relationships
- Principal as IL
 - Differences from Assistant Principal
 - Principal Influence
- Relationship
- Trust
- Calibration
- Peer Support
- Professional Development
- Assistant Principal Training/Preparation
 - Teaching experience
 - Opportunities to get involved
 - Cohorts
 - Peer Support
 - Changes to Position
 - Recommendations
- COVID
 - Remote Learning
 - COVID Safety
 - Grace
 - COVID Practices
 - COVID Changes
- Chaos Theory
 - Learning Curve