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Editorial

Mentoring to Build Leadership in Education

Mentoring is a tool utilised in a wide range of professions where “... one person (the mentor) facilitates the development of another (the mentee) by sharing his or her knowledge, experience, network, etc., and customizes it to the needs of the mentee” (Shah, 2017, p. 1). Within the field of education, formal and informal mentoring structures support and enhance induction and retention of employees and provide job-embedded professional development opportunities in pursuit of developing capacity at all levels. This special issue of *Leading & Managing* examines mentoring relationships at the teacher, principal, and superintendent levels that develop leaders and shape the career paths of new employees.

Peña, Rincones, and Vega-Barrio begin the issue with their piece titled “Sisterhood mentoring: The experience of Latina superintendents.” The authors conducted a series of two virtual conversations with four Latina superintendents to understand the role of mentoring in their career path to the superintendency and how mentoring each other supports them in their current role. The superintendent lived experiences, values, and understanding of culture helped develop a mentoring structure removed from traditional hierarchy approaches and instead focuses on mutual growth. Expanding this form of mentoring will further assist in eliminating the isolation felt by female superintendents and develop their professional abilities.

The article, “From mentee to leader: Learning and well-being in a formal mentoring program” by Connery and Frick shifts our discussion to principal mentoring. In their study, seven school administrators, including a mix of mentors and mentees who participated in the Missouri Administrator Mentoring Program, were interviewed. Findings suggest mentees perceived learning in effective communication to promote positive relationships, time management to successfully balance between work and home life, and developed increased capacity in their role through critical examination of their day-to-day experiences related to policy and procedures. The authors conclude with recommendations for state and local policy makers and higher education institutions to implement these findings to support novice school administrators.

Coaching is a word associated with mentoring due to its relationship-based support to the development of knowledge and skills of an individual. In “Transformational coaching: Heightening early career principals’ self-efficacy in a large urban district,” researchers administered the *Principal Sense of Efficacy Survey* to principals who did and did not participate in the district’s New Principal Support Program that focused on coaching practices. Pearson and Birringer-Haig found that new principals in the program had higher self-efficacy in their instructional leadership and remained in their role longer than those who did not participate in the coaching program.

Next, our shift focuses on mentoring to support teachers through Mullen and Fleming’s article, “New teacher mentoring in a culture of overload: Perspectives from Appalachian principals.” This article explores principal practices that influence state/district required formal teacher mentoring programs in high poverty rural schools. Through school leader interviews,

three cases were developed to explore the issue. The article concludes with activities to foster reflective dialogue regarding the findings.

Effective mentoring is often used to retain teachers within the profession. In their article, “Unconscious gatekeepers: Mentor bias, dispositions, and the shaping of teaching careers” by Samson, Taylor, and Nigar, the authors explore the impact mentors have on the success of the mentoring relationship by analysing the contradiction between mentors’ growth-mindset when it comes to individuals learning the knowledge and skills of teaching versus their fixed-mindset mentors have toward innate disposition of teachers. The authors offer a mentoring framework that integrates the epistemological and ontological domains to overcome mentors’ unconscious biases.

Part of instructional leadership is to provide support to teachers to increase student achievement. However, Mullen and Badger demonstrate through examples from the COVID-19 pandemic that support alone is insufficient. In their article, “Can middle school leaders support instruction in a multifaceted crisis—Is ‘support’ comprehensive enough,” the authors introduce a mentoring framework SACE which stands for Support, Accessibility, Collaboration, and Equity.

This article leads into a review of Carol Mullen’s (2025) new book, *Equity in School Mentoring and Induction*. She argues that mentoring programs must include equity and social justice elements to increase job satisfaction of teachers, improve teacher well-being, retain teachers in the profession, and increase diverse student learning outcomes. The author provides examples of the application of the SACE mentoring framework through the discussion of case studies.

Mentoring is a process that political states and provinces, school districts, and leaders can implement that addresses the multifaceted challenges education is currently facing. The literature on mentoring has shown positive outcomes for both mentors and mentees including support, skill development, collaboration, feedback, development of self-efficacy, retention in career, and professional growth (Ehrich et al., 2002). The articles in this issue reinforce the foundation of the importance of mentoring programs, outline the benefits of such programs to mentors, mentees, and students, and provide concrete examples of the implementation of mentoring frameworks to support the growth of educators and ultimately, the well-being of the students they serve.

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Sisterhood Mentoring: The Experiences of Latina Superintendents

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ABSTRACT: The article explored the mentoring experiences of Latina superintendents working in school districts with marginalised, predominantly Hispanic, low-income, and emergent bilingual populations, located along the U.S.-Mexico border. Through Pláticas—a narrative methodology rooted in Latinx feminist traditions that centres personal storytelling—Critical Feminist Epistemology (CFE), and Relational Cultural Theory (RCT), this study highlights these women’s experiences of mentorship and support networks within the challenging landscape of the superintendency.

Key words: Latina superintendents, mentoring, Pláticas, Critical Feminist Epistemology, Relational Cultural Theory

Introduction

In 2000, noting the absence of research on Latina leaders, Méndez-Morse (2000) hypothesised that this might be due to either few researchers examining Latina educational leaders or that in fact, there were “very few Latinas in administrative ranks, especially the superintendency” (p. 584). More than 20 years later, there continues to be a gap in the literature centring the experience of Latina leaders and Latina superintendents (Castillo et al., 2021). Recent data on Texas superintendents reflect a bleak reality for women. In 2020-21, 23% of Texas superintendents were women, 4% Latinas, and generally, these women served high-poverty school districts (DeMatthews et al., 2023). The data also reflect that female superintendents are paid less than their male counterparts, regardless of experience level and district size and location.

Several studies address common recommendations to achieve gender equity at the superintendency level and to increase opportunities for women within districts to rise internally into leadership positions (ILO Group, 2024). Some of these recommendations are equity in recruitment, implementing transparent and unbiased hiring practices, encouraging search firms to actively promote diverse candidates, promoting policies that address work-life balance, and ensuring pay equity for female superintendents. Researcher studies establish robust mentoring and sponsorship networks to guide aspiring female leaders are needed (Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021; Prats-Brugat et al., 2024; Ragins & Kram, 2007).

In an effort to help fill the gap in the literature about Latina superintendents and mentoring of Latina superintendents, the purpose of this study was to better understand the role of mentoring in how Latina superintendents navigated the journey to the superintendency and performed a heavily politicised and complex role. In this article, we present the findings from data collected from two *Pláticas* (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016) with four current Latina superintendents serving in Texas school districts. The *Pláticas* evolved organically around these women’s journey to the superintendency and their experiences with mentoring. Through utilising thematic analysis of the *Pláticas*, several themes were revealed. What we present here are those findings and our analysis of how they inform the larger topic of Latinas in the superintendency.

Literature Review

The literature review offers first a brief view of the research related to women in the superintendency, with specific emphasis in the United States and Texas; then we follow with an overview of mentoring in general and in relation to women in education and female superintendents. We finalise the review of literature with information about critical perspectives on mentoring, specifically mentoring of women.

Women in the Superintendency

Despite women representing the majority of the education workforce (Harris et al., 2024; Schaeffer, 2024) and an increase in female administrators in educational settings, only about

23% of superintendents are women, a statistic that highlights significant gender disparities and persistent under-representation of women in the superintendency within educational leadership (ILO Group, 2024; Muñoz et al., 2018). In an extensive review of contemporary literature (spanning 2014–2024) examining the challenges and dynamics faced by women in educational leadership, numerous challenges point to the under-representation of women in senior educational leadership positions (Harris et al., 2024). These challenges are compounded by the glass ceiling which continues to be a significant barrier for women in leadership roles (Harris et al., 2024). Family care responsibilities disproportionately affect women's career progression and mothers face a motherhood penalty impacting their perceived competence and advancement. Cultural, organisational, structural, and personal barriers also hinder women's leadership progression (Harris et al., 2024), including traditional career paths, societal perceptions of leadership, and a lack of equitable mentoring which contribute to this disparity (Muñoz et al., 2018). Mentoring experiences vary in terms of the quality and effectiveness of mentoring and there is a lack of female role models and mentors in leadership positions that hampers women's progression to those top leadership roles. The invisibility of women leaders is further exacerbated by discrimination, particularly with the intersection of factors like race, culture, and socio-economic status with gender (Harris et al., 2024).

Despite a call to move away from traditional perceptions of Latinas within the culture and of their place in the world (Quilantán and Menchaca-Ochoa, 2004), when we zoom into the exploration of Latinas superintendents both nationally and in Texas (where this study took place), we find that similar challenges exist (DeMatthews et al., 2023; Muñoz et al., 2018). Systemic barriers and inequities within the educational leadership pipeline and unique challenges faced by Latinas, such as slower promotion rates and biased hiring practices, continue to keep Latinas out of the superintendency. The creation of mentorship programs offers a possibility to alleviate systemic barriers faced by Latinas in attaining superintendent roles.

Mentoring in Education and Female Superintendents

Mentoring research in educational contexts has been extensively explored, with recent studies emphasising gender dynamics, evolving definitions, and the impact on female leadership. In analysing gender in mentoring research, the persistence of stereotypes and the lack of intersectional perspectives is often present (Prats-Brugat et al., 2024). When examining the evolving nature of mentoring, traditional definitions are found to be outdated (Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021). Researchers recommend the use of a dynamic framework that integrates mentoring within personal, organisational, and systemic reform contexts, and inclusive mentoring models that address structural inequalities emphasising equity and social justice (Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021; Prats-Brugat et al., 2024). Ragins and Kram (2007) classify mentoring functions into career and psychosocial roles, underscoring its increasing reciprocity and inclusivity in modern workplaces. They advocate for richer, more diverse approaches to studying mentoring, emphasising its dynamic, relational, and reciprocal nature. Research on female superintendents (Bynum & Young, 2015; Copeland & Calhoun, 2014) highlights the significance of mentoring in career advancement and overcoming gender-specific barriers. These studies stress the need for systemic efforts to expand mentoring opportunities and foster female

leadership in education. Overall, mentoring research has traditionally focused on hierarchical relationships and formal mentoring, with limited exploration of peer, reciprocal, and group mentoring models. The mutuality perspective, which considers the benefits for both mentors and mentees, is gaining attention as a valuable approach to understanding developmental networks (Dobrow et al., 2012; Garza, 2020).

Critical Perspectives of Traditional Mentoring

Scholars have increasingly called for integrating critical and feminist approaches into mentoring to challenge traditional hierarchical models and promote equity. Research highlights the limitations of mentorship programs in creating systemic change and argues that traditional mentoring programs often serve organisational interests rather than addressing structural inequalities (Dashper, 2017; Kalev et al., 2006). Critiques of functionalist mentoring perspectives advocate for Radical Humanist mentoring, an approach that emphasises social justice, mutual learning, and the dismantling of power imbalances (Darwin, 2000). There is also an emphasis on the importance of recognising power differentials, particularly for women of colour, who face unique barriers in mentorship relationships (Alfrey & Twine, 2017; Ghosh, 2015). Similarly, Harris (2022) critiques women-focused mentoring programs for reinforcing neoliberal feminist ideals centred on individual success rather than collective action. She advocates for a feminist mentoring model that fosters counterspaces for challenging workplace inequalities and enacting structural change. These counterspaces are safe spaces where women can share openly without fear of reprisal and feel validated (Solórzano et al., 2000). Researchers have also recommended exploring feminist mentoring through relational cultural theory (RCT), emphasising connection, empathy, and shared leadership over hierarchy (Alvarez & Lazzari, 2016). Collectively, these critical studies call for reimagining mentoring as a collaborative and transformative process that prioritises equity, empowerment, and systemic reform.

Theoretical Framework

To frame this study, we utilise Chicana Feminist Epistemology (CFE) and Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT). CFE, we believe, offers a theoretical framework for understanding the experiences of women superintendents. CFE challenges dominant knowledge paradigms by emphasising embodied knowledge, spirituality, and resistance to systemic oppression (Delgado Bernal, 1998). It builds upon Latina/o critical race theory (LatCrit) (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001) to provide a framework for understanding how women superintendents navigate educational institutions shaped by patriarchal, racial, and class-based hierarchies. According to Delgado Bernal (1998), Chicana epistemology includes four key principles: cultural intuition, shifting identities, the importance of spiritual and emotional ways of knowing, and a commitment to social justice. These principles provide an alternative framework for understanding leadership among Latina superintendents who must balance their cultural identities with the demands of a predominantly white, male-dominated educational leadership

landscape. By validating their lived experiences as sources of knowledge, CFE highlights the ways these leaders navigate and transform educational institutions.

Research indicates that women superintendents, particularly those from minority backgrounds, must navigate complex sociopolitical terrains in educational leadership (ILO Group, 2022). CFE provides a lens through which to analyse these experiences, illustrating how these leaders use cultural intuition (Delgado Bernal, 1998) and lived experiences to challenge inequitable structures within education. Cultural intuition refers to the integration of personal, familial, and community knowledge into leadership practices (Delgado Bernal, 1998). Chicana superintendents draw from their experiences as women of colour to implement policies that promote equity and inclusion. By leveraging their cultural intuition, they foster school environments that reflect the needs of diverse student populations.

To understand the mentoring experiences of the participants in this study and account the role of the cultural context where these Latinas serve as superintendents, we frame our study using Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT) (Jordan, 2024). We believe RCT offers a complimentary and aligned framework to the CFE tenets and our chosen methodology, which we discuss the next section. RCT provides a framework for understanding the role of relationships, connection, and growth-fostering interactions in leadership. Initially developed within psychology, RCT provides a framework for understanding how relationships impact personal growth, self-concept, and resilience. According to Jordan (2024), “RCT is built on the premise that, throughout the lifespan, human beings grow through and toward connection” (p. 4). As such, RCT “places connections at the center of growth” (Jordan, 2024, p. 8). RCT has been increasingly applied to leadership and organisational studies, particularly in examining how women leaders navigate systemic barriers (Jordan, 2024). Women superintendents, who often work within historically patriarchal educational institutions, benefit from RCT’s focus on relationships as sources of empowerment, resilience, and systemic change. According to Jordan (2024), the core concepts of RCT include the following:

1. People grow through and toward relationship throughout the lifespan; 2. Movement toward mutuality rather than separation characterizes mature functioning; 3. Relationship differentiation and elaboration characterize growth; 4. Mutual empathy and mutual empowerment are at the core of growth-fostering relationships; 5. Authenticity is necessary for real engagement and full participation in growth-fostering relationships; 6. In growth-fostering relationships, all people contribute and grow or benefit. Development is not a one-way street; 7. One of the goals of development from a relational perspective is the development of increased relational competence and capacities over the lifespan; 8. Mutual empathy is the primary means through which we grow. Placing mutual empathy at the core of human development not only affects the individual but also contributes to the growth of a just society. Social justice is the outcome of the practice of mutuality in which the needs and experience of both people in any given interaction are respected and honored. (p. 33)

These principles provide a valuable lens for understanding how women superintendents lead within complex educational environments. Women superintendents often face gendered expectations and systemic barriers in their leadership roles. Research suggests that many adopt

relational leadership styles, prioritising collaboration, inclusivity, and social-emotional support to foster equitable educational environments (Comstock et al., 2008). RCT highlights how these leaders utilise relationships as sources of strength and transformation in their institutions.

When applied to mentoring, RCT highlights the mutual, empathic, and growth-oriented nature of the mentor-mentee relationship. Some of the core concepts more salient to mentoring include mutual empathy, authenticity, empowerment through connection, open communication, mutual learning, and the role cultural contexts power dynamics, and systemic inequities play in shaping relationships. In mentoring, attention is paid to how race, gender, class, and other cultural factors influence the dynamics of the relationship. In setting forth these components, we view RCT as supporting our chosen methodology—*Pláticas*—and our intent on exploring the mentoring experiences of Latina superintendents on their leadership journey.

Research Methodology

To understand the role of mentoring in how Latina superintendents navigated the journey to the superintendency and performed a heavily politicised and complex role, we adopted *Pláticas*, a methodology that draws from Chicana/Latina feminist methodology (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016). We viewed *Pláticas* as a culturally appropriate methodology that aligned to the purpose of this work, namely capturing these Latinas' mentoring experiences through their subjective view. *Pláticas*, considered to serve as “a conversational strategy to collect data and carry out research” (Flores Carmona et al., 2021, p. 1213), enabled us to engage the participants in intimate conversations about their journey to the superintendency and their mentoring experiences along the way. In our adoption of *Pláticas*, we focused on ensuring the principles set forth by Fierros and Delgado Bernal (2016) were honoured. These principles include co-construction of knowledge, emphasis on the lived experiences, allowing the participants to raise topics of importance to them, creating a potential space for healing, incorporating reciprocity, vulnerability, and self-reflexivity, and finally grounded Chicana feminist epistemologies.

Because *Pláticas* are grounded in Chicana feminist epistemology, the researchers' positionality is central to how they navigate the conversation, build the relationship with the participants as co-constructors of knowledge, and interpret meaning (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016; Flores & Morales, 2021; Flores Carmona et al., 2021). As such, examining our research positions was a reflexive exercise the three authors engaged in individually and during conversations held before, between, and after the *Pláticas*. We also incorporated reflexivity in the data analysis and offer the following brief statements reflecting the authors' positionalities in relation to this study.

Researchers' Positionalities

Peña

I am a first-generation college graduate from a working-class family born and raised (and currently living in) the border town of El Paso, TX. The binational culture, representative of my hometown, of *la frontera*, is also reflected in who I am, contradictions and all. I am a Chicana, a Latina, at times Mexican-American, a hyphenated version of myself, that is neither *de aquí, ni de allá*. This sense of not belonging neither here nor there is part of my experience as I have occupied spaces that historically and traditionally were not meant for a woman, much less a woman of colour. I hold two terminal degrees, an Ed.D. from UTEP and a law degree from Columbia Law. This formal education has influenced how I view the world. Intertwined into my way of knowing are the lessons passed down through numerous *consejos* and *pláticas* from all the *mujeres guerreras* in my family, circle of friends, and professional colleagues. Throughout my life, the act of *platicando* has been a way to not only connect, but also to informally learn. These combined educational experiences have given me incredible privilege and cultivated my sense of self, work, and value of my voice. Entering this research space with these Latina superintendents, holding space for our *pláticas*, felt like a natural way of learning.

Rincones

I am a cisgender male from México where I conducted research and extension work with campesinos and members of indigenous communities from Puebla and Chiapas. From those experiences and exchanges, I learned to listen to and learn from deep rooted wisdom held by members of these communities. All that knowledge and experience was shared through *pláticas*, conversations held in different forms. Sometimes while walking, other times while eating and drinking, and some other times while driving down the road. Fast forward to my years in the United States and after 30 plus years of experience in educational organisations in the borderland between the United States and México, I have collaborated with women researchers from both sides of the border on different projects about discrimination, racism, care, violence against women and other minorities. In relation to this project, I knew three of the subjects but not well enough to feel comfortable having *pláticas* with them. I was reluctant to participate in the data collection phase of the study. I was cognisant and worried that my presence and male privilege would hamper the *pláticas*. However, the third author and subject in the study reassured me that my participation would not influence their responses since all of them (women) feel comfortable speaking their minds when men are around. To avoid potential biases during the data collection and data analysis phases, I did a lot of listening. This was reminiscent of my earlier experiences having *pláticas* con campesinos and members of indigenous communities in southern México where I always sought clarification and showed respect for what was shared and the meaning they made. It was with this same energy that I entered this space; I honoured what the women said, setting aside any preconceived notions that surfaced about what was being shared.

Vega-Barrio

I am a lifelong resident of a small rural town located on the U.S-Mexico border. I come from a family that values education and is committed to public service as the proud daughter of a retired Chief of Police and a retired school cafeteria worker. My siblings similarly hold degrees in education and medicine, which have allowed them to continue the family tradition of service and work to improve the lives of children. I have been a life-long educator, serving as a teacher and in several administrative positions. My focus has always been improving the lives of children and the community through providing students with the best possible educational experiences. As a superintendent, it is important to honour the long history and traditions of my district and to empower the community. Beyond my district, I have a commitment to supporting other women leaders aspiring to become superintendents or already serving in the role.

Participants

The four Latina superintendents who participated in the Pláticas have known each other professionally for some time. They have socialised with each other through professional networks and from these experiences, their friendship has grown. The two authors, Peña and Rincones, have professional relationships with three of these women through other research projects and have also served as graduate school professors of the third author, Vega-Barrio. All four participants in this study are currently serving in the superintendent role and have extensive and diverse careers in P-12 education. These Latina superintendents lead school districts in Texas with marginalised, predominantly Hispanic, low-income, and emergent bilingual populations. The majority of these school districts are located along the U.S.-Mexico border. Table 1 provides more detail about the participants and the districts they lead.

Table 1

Participants

Participant (Pseudonym)	Education	Experience	District Information (SY 2023-2024)
Esperanza	doctorate degree	school and central office combined: 26 years superintendent: 9 years	enrolment: 3,009 minority students: 99.2% economically disadvantaged students: 92.7%
Alegria	master's degree pursuing a doctorate	school and central office combined: 17 years superintendent: 8 years	enrolment: 761 minority students: 99.9% economically disadvantaged students: 92.6%

Participant (Pseudonym)	Education	Experience	District Information (SY 2023-2024)
Adela	doctorate degree	school and central office combined: 34 years superintendent: 4 years	enrolment: 7,252 minority students: 77.8% economically disadvantaged students: 79.5%
Estrella	master's degree pursuing a doctorate	school and central office combined: 30 years superintendent: 2 years	enrolment: 49,050 minority students: 91.5% economically disadvantaged students: 75.2%

Data Collection and Analysis

We held two virtual Pláticas via Zoom, each lasting about one and a half hours, that were recorded and transcribed. To honour the time commitments of the superintendents and remain faithful to a two-way dialogue, we did not have a set list of interview questions or protocol as we would in a more traditional semi-structured interview. Instead, prior to holding the first Plática, in conversation with our third author, we determined the topic of conversation: the mentoring experiences of these Latinas as they ascended to the superintendency. The third author of this article then informed the superintendents of the topic, who agreed on the selection.

During the first Plática, we began with a general question—How did you decide to become a superintendent?—to elicit a conversation around this journey. Staying true to the spirit of Pláticas, we allowed the conversation to flow based on the participants' identification of topics that were important as they recounted their journeys. At the request of the participants, for the second Plática, we developed a few questions to focus the conversation on the themes related to mentoring that emerged during the first Plática. To develop those questions, the three authors reviewed the transcript of the first Plática, identified some key ideas, and co-developed questions to help guide our second Plática. We began our second conversation with the following question that allowed us to continue exploring ideas related to where the first Plática left off: Can you provide an example where you remain true to your authentic self in your leadership? From there, the conversation naturally flowed from one topic to another, dissipating the need to refer to the questions we developed.

Allowing for the natural ebb and flow of Pláticas, where multiple identities of the participants are present and there is a co-construction of conversation topics or questions and thus of knowledge, is what distinguishes this methodology from semi-structured interviews (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016). This methodology invites and celebrates participant subjectivity into the Plática space, recognising the value of the participant's subjective in knowledge creation. Pláticas is a methodology that enables us, as researchers, to capture the cultural intuition, an integration of a series of factors—"personal, familial, and community

knowledge” —in the leadership practices (Delgado Bernal, 1988) of these four Latina women. The intent of this methodology is to capture the knowledge these Latina have acquired throughout their life experiences in a way that honours and aligns with their cultural identities as Latinas.

Honouring the essence of *Pláticas*, where the components of methodology—research question, epistemological leaning, methods, participants, data analysis, and researcher positionality—are tightly woven together to create one process that is at times not a linear, step by step process (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016), we engaged in data analysis as follows. As the *Pláticas* ensued, knowledge was shared and co-constructed in the moment. In between the two *Pláticas*, we individually reviewed the transcript and then discussed emerging themes related to mentoring. After the second *Plática*, we again reviewed the transcript individually, and inductively coded the data looking for patterns and commonalities between each of the mentoring experiences shared through the *Pláticas*. Leaning on our cultural intuition (Delgado Bernal, 1998), we also engaged our full selves into the data analysis process, incorporating our own embodied knowledge of leadership and mentoring, and the knowledge that was emerging through the *Pláticas*. It is important to note that the contribution of the third author, who was also a participant in this study, came from a place of intimately knowing the superintendency and the role of mentoring. In alignment with *Pláticas*, as a methodology where participants actively engage in the data analysis and interpretation resulting in the co-creation knowledge, the third author individually analysed the data collected including her own responses. After this initial individual analysis, we collectively engaged in reflexivity and open and honest discussion about what the data were revealing and emerging themes. We collectively theorised on what knowledge was co-constructed around our topic of mentoring and agreed on highlighting the findings we present below.

Findings

In the case of each of these Latina superintendents, mentoring according to them was important to ascend to the superintendency. In their careers, someone recognised leadership qualities in them and encouraged them to pursue the superintendency. After analysing the data reflecting the experiences they shared during our two *Pláticas*, four themes emerged: 1. More than being the only Latina in the room; 2. Igniting the commitment to leadership; 3. From mentoring to creating a sisterhood; and, 4. Paying it forward. Using pseudonyms for each participant, we present the themes below.

More Than Being the Only Latina in the Room

When the topic of how being a Latina intersects with their role as superintendents, the four participants recognised the importance of their ethnicity but expressed that their leadership was anchored to something broader. Describing her experience in attending a statewide meeting early in her superintendency, Alegría expressed: “I walked in, and I looked around and sat down and I thought okay, I’m sure there are going to be more women walking through that door. There was none. I was the only female.” She further recognised that over the past six years, not much

has changed in terms of who is in the rooms where those statewide conferences and workshops are held. Adela similarly shared that even before she became a superintendent, as she moved into different leadership roles, “[she] was one of the few women in the room [and] sometimes the only woman in the room.” Esperanza added to this idea by stating:

I think for a moment, sometimes you walk into a room and you think, okay, yeah, you’re going to be the only woman there. Maybe the only Latina there or what have you, but I think that as you do the job more, that becomes less of your focus because whatever you go into a room for, we’re going to walk in with what we need for our communities for our students. And so initially you do feel that shock of okay you’re the only woman there and they’re all white and they’re male and sometimes you feel that good old boy system. That part doesn’t ever go away. I think that’s still sometimes very present. But I think that as women, we just ... we have to be intentional.

She further explained: “If I happen to be the only Latina there, I just want to make sure that they know that I’m there to represent the voice of the children I’m truly working for.” Adela agreed explaining:

I want children to be successful. I want them to reach their goals and so for me, that means that I lead with my heart. And again, I go back to my belief system, my values, but I’m the model and so I don’t have to put up a sign and say, you know, I’m a Latina. I am and I was the first Latina in [the district I previously served].

Adding to this idea that identifying as the Latina in the room may not always be part of their leadership, Alegría reflected, “I don’t walk in somewhere thinking I’m a Hispanic.” She went further, explaining:

I’m a woman, you know, I’m there for to serve a purpose and not only that, to be able to continue to improve that mission that I’m on and that purpose that I’m in in this lifetime. And so, you know, anchoring as far as myself, being true to how I was raised ... it’s so important.

While the women did not expressly centre their ethnicity in describing their superintendent experience, they did express the importance of elements of their identities. These Latina superintendents connected their leadership to the human element in schools. Their leadership values were acted upon in a way that touched the life of a real person. Their leadership was not defined in the abstract, but in the context of their community in real-time.

Igniting the Commitment to Leadership

As the women recounted their experiences, what surfaced were experiences that took place years before they started down the path to the superintendency that were pivotal in their journeys to the role. These experiences happened early in these Latinas’ lives and served as the nudge toward leadership. For example, in remembering the first time the idea of becoming a superintendent crossed her mind, Alegría recounted being a young high school student and being

very upset and I don’t remember what the situation was, but I remember having that conversation with [the high school coach, who also served as the counsellor and principal]

and he said, well, you know, you're so upset at this you know that you can go and become a superintendent.

As she pondered this idea, she also questioned, "Why do I have to be a teacher? You know, I want to go and become a superintendent you know, and so that's what led me here." This very early experience sparked her desire to one day become a superintendent, and she shared, "I feel like I had been preparing for [the superintendent role] since I was young [and the] universe aligned" to make it happen.

Adela's early experience was different. She mentioned "my dad was a principal" and yet, despite that, she openly shared, "I really did not see myself going into leadership at all." We can surmise that given her dad's position, Adela received informal mentoring from a young age, but it was not until much later in her career that she considered the superintendency. She recalled, "I do tell people often that I think that the job finds you so many of the times and I think that this is what has happened in every single case and there have been mentors along the way." Estrella similarly expressed:

I was never chasing the superintendency; it wasn't until I became a chief academic officer [in a school district] ... and I worked for a wonderful superintendent who, you know, he always encouraged me and mentored me as [Adela] said, to truly consider the superintendency.

Reflecting on their initial experiences in the superintendent role, Alegría, Esperanza and Estrella all shared there was a lack of women mentors. For example, in thinking about her own mentors, Estrella shared that:

Unfortunately, the vast majority of those mentors were men. You know, there weren't as many females out there mentoring and it was probably because there weren't as many females in the chairs, you know, that I was in at the time.

Esperanza stressed that, "My male mentors [told me] you need to develop thick skin. And, I think that I do have thick skin." For all four participants, the initial mentors were males which is of no surprise given the documented under-representation of women in these leadership positions.

From Mentoring to Creating a Sisterhood

As the topic of the Pláticas moved into current day mentoring relationships, one of the themes that surfaced was a moving away from traditional, hierarchical mentoring modalities and relationships to the creation of their own mentoring network where these four women engaged in mentoring and supporting one another. This relationship reflected a sisterhood among the four, where their concern extended beyond each of their professional needs, moving into a space of authentic care for one another. Thinking back to the early phase of her superintendency, Esperanza observed:

Unfortunately, when I started the superintendency, I didn't have women mentors which is what I think is neat about this group ... when we need to come together for each other, that's what we do. Even though all of us are very busy, we just do it.

Even after they have taken new jobs at different districts, the outreach and commitment to support each other has not waived. Esperanza further explained that in those instances, even with the pressure of starting at a new district, “there’s a text here and there.” She also expressed the group’s ability to “step in to help when we can” and when they come back together, “We pick up where we left off.” Reinforcing the evolution of their relationship, Adela remarked, “We are really connected through the sisterhood of superintendency.” The women also acknowledged that their tight knit bond was influenced by the fact that as female superintendents, “we are a small percentage of the Latinas.”

In reflecting on how she contributes to this sisterhood, Alegría revealed that “I keep an eye on everything that they’re [Adela, Esperanza, and Estrella] doing and so I’m the cheerleader behind them because I see the true passion that they are putting in to be able to improve lives.” Noting that it goes beyond being each other’s cheerleaders, Estrella expressed, “It is critical and important for us to begin to mentor ourselves and understand the huge responsibility that we now have, you know, to be the first.” Given their desire to expand the sisterhood beyond the four by helping other women navigate the leadership pipeline, and continue to impact communities like the ones they serve (U.S.-Mexico border communities, historically marginalised and underserved), Esperanza shared, “I have surrounded myself with like-minded women through the Texas Council of Women’s School Executives and the Texas Association of Latino Administrators and Superintendents who have a vision for furthering Latino children in the state of Texas.” These four Latina superintendents understood the importance and power of connections and growth-fostering interactions through their sisterhood mentoring network that supports them, helping them navigate the complex role of the superintendent.

Paying it Forward

In addition to being part of professional organisations, all four of the superintendents also expressed a commitment to mentoring the next wave of educational leaders, in particular females and Latina superintendents. Taking a step back to look at the big picture, Esperanza observed:

It’s so important for us, this whole mentorship thing, because we invest in other women because we had so limited opportunities from women investing in us. Like [for me], all of my mentors, anybody who said I could do this was a male. And that’s, I think, the challenging part.

This desire and the way in which they mentor is anchored to who they are and the values that guide their own leadership. Reflecting on her own leadership, Alegría stressed

how important it is for us to anchor ourselves to our values and our principles, and I would like to add how important it is to anchor yourself in the true you. Who are you as an individual before a leader?

Further expanding on this idea, surfacing her own self-reflexivity, Alegría offered:

I have found [in] myself, that when I sway away from being who I am things don’t go well ... with the politics of a small district, it gets very nasty and gray and murky and, you know, you have to be able to sway through that being true to yourself.

Speaking to this idea of knowing who you are, Estrella raised the need to be authentic sharing:

[W]hen you lead from the heart and you have a great sense of passion for what you do, then the ability to be authentic and for people to really feel, you know, that passion and that energy that you have for your work. It's just a natural thing and I'm not sure if that's you know so much a female characteristic, but you know, I feel like for me as a leader, my greatest strength is my authenticity.

Both Esperanza and Adela agreed with the importance of centring authenticity in their leadership.

Continuing to self-reflect, Alegría began by asking, "What is holding us back? And so, then I start questioning myself, are we holding each other back? And that is honestly where, that mentorship I feel is lacking. It's [mentoring] lacking across the whole state, the whole nation."

She asserted that helping propel someone to leadership is not enough, but rather there is a need for intentional mentoring efforts. Estrella added to this idea by sharing, "I feel like it's my obligation, my responsibility to pay it forward to really recognise talent and nurture people and encourage them." Adela echoed this sentiment stating, "We're like proud mamas when we see any of the people that we have been mentoring move into different [leadership] positions."

She also raised how they perceive the mentoring relationship as mutual, rather than hierarchical, adding:

And so, I think that mentors are very, very important and that they can offer so much and it's what I try to do. Whenever I'm mentoring anybody ... I know the value of the mentorship that can exist. And I think once you become a mentor that you also receive so much in return. And so, I think that that's the same for the mentors who have encouraged me. It really is.

A commitment to paying it forward reflects the dialogical nature of mentoring, where connections are developed and nurtured that foster mutual growth between the mentor and mentee.

Discussion

As we engaged in making sense of what the data revealed, we recognised our existing relationships with each other and our shared experiences of living and working in education systems located on the U.S.-Mexico Border created a common understanding that was an unspoken and continuous element in our Pláticas. The nature of Pláticas and CFE creates spaces for these elements in educational research and knowledge creation. It was also necessary to situate the findings in the broader context of developing women leaders, while recognising the absence of research on Latina leaders. To account for the factors that impact women's engagement in the workforce, O'Neil et al. (2015) identified essentials that contribute to the development of women's leadership presence: self-confidence, self-efficacy, influence, and authenticity. As structural changes may take longer to occur, mentoring is one avenue to develop these attributes. We turn to RCT (Jordan, 2024) to help us account for gender, ethnicity, and other cultural factors that impact mentoring relationships and experiences. In the context of

mentoring, RCT emphasises centring human connection, the presence of cultural context in power dynamics, and elements such as mutual empathy and authenticity.

These four Latinas have been successful in securing and serving as superintendents, in large part due to the mentoring they received from men. While not discounting the value and importance of such mentoring experiences, these women also recognise the importance of women mentors. This is reflected through the creation of their own mentoring network through the sisterhood the four of them have developed. They have extended this sisterhood in mentoring network to include other aspiring women educational leaders where not only are they helping empower these other women, but also add value to their own leadership practices. Intuitively and from comments made during the *Pláticas*, we see mentoring becoming more mutual, where the benefits are derived from being mentored and from also mentoring others. Mentoring for these women is becoming more strategic, with a focus on developing networks at the state and national levels.

Evidence of mentoring among these Latinas reflected how their relationships rely on mutual growth rather than traditional hierarchical structures. Mutuality, as stressed by RCT (Jordan, 2024), challenges the traditional mentor-mentee dynamic, advocating for relational mentoring that focuses on mutual support and shared leadership. This approach can lead to more authentic and effective mentoring relationships. These women rely on their own values and authenticity to anchor not only their leadership, but their commitment to mentoring each other and others. Having a strong sense of who they are, their cultural identities as reflected throughout the *Pláticas* with their references to their upbringing, their own families, and the communities they serve, reinforces this commitment.

Mentoring and the development of supportive networks counter lack of connection and isolation for women superintendents and promote professional development and growth. This is highlighted by RCT (Jordan, 2024) and feminist social theory (Alfrey & Twine, 2017; Alvarez & Lazzari, 2016) that emphasises that supportive networks can help mitigate feelings of lack of connection and isolation by providing validation and shared experiences. When we consider the complexities of superintendency, which are often compounded by the context of the school district, these feelings of isolation are amplified. In this instance, challenges faced by these superintendents managing controversial decisions affecting their communities, such as eliminating athletic programs and closing schools due to low enrolments, were compounded by working in under-resourced school districts, they frequently navigated issues related to resource allocation and educational equity for Hispanic and emerging bilingual students. Despite their best efforts, some of their decisions were met with community and school board resistance, placing them under immense pressure to advocate for their students' needs while balancing public expectations, professional responsibilities, and individual values. In these instances, the sisterhood among the superintendents provided them with crucial support, offering a space to seek advice, emotional encouragement, and share wisdom drawn from their similar backgrounds and experiences.

Initially, these Latina superintendents received mentorship from male leaders, who helped them build foundational knowledge, skills, and networking acumen needed to navigate the journey to the superintendency. While these male mentors shared leadership insights, considering

feminist perspective of RCT (Jordan, 2024), it is possible that they lacked an understanding of the unique cultural and gender-related challenges faced by Latina superintendents. Seeking mentoring that aligned with their cultural and gender specific challenges led these superintendents to seek support from each other, forming a peer-mentorship network that emphasised sisterhood, shared values, and cultural empathy. These self-created supports enabled them to cope with the complex intersection of their personal and professional lives and identities, helping them sustain their roles in a field where Latina leaders are significantly under-represented.

These superintendents supported each other through shared experiences and values, mutual respect, and cultural understanding. This way of mentoring centres relational and culturally responsive elements, offering an alternative to traditional mentorship, which often emphasises hierarchy and technical knowledge. Embedding sisterhood in mentoring, these superintendents created a safe space to confront and navigate the complexities of their roles as leaders, mothers, and advocates for equity. While the experiences of these four women depict possibility and success, it does not reflect a universal experience of women, much less Latinas, in top leadership positions such as the superintendency. Instead, their experiences underscore the need for mentorship models that address the cultural and gender-specific experiences of Latina leaders.

Implications for Practice and Recommendations for Future Research

While there are numerous implications for this study, we focus on implications that address the root cause for the lack of women in the superintendent role. The first implication is around reframing the role of women in the superintendency for school boards and communities to create a better understanding of the complexity of the role. This includes addressing the conditions that may dissuade women from stepping into the role, but also what may be preventing them, as school boards, from selecting women. This requires a shift in the narrative around what makes an effective woman superintendent and even what a superintendent looks like.

School districts have an opportunity to reshape policies and practices to minimise the systemic barriers that keep women out of leadership roles, including the superintendency. This includes equitable compensation, work-life balance considerations, and creating a strategic leadership pipeline to grow leaders from within the organisation. An investment in leadership pipelines that encourage women to move from teacher to leadership roles that is complemented by work conditions, organisational culture, and fair hiring practices that retain district employees is part of this equation. Similarly, professional organisations continuing to develop targeted mentoring opportunities for women would help support district efforts.

Recognising the slow rate at which changes to systemic barriers that impact the lives of women as they move through leadership pipelines, we also believe that women need to continue to be proactive in fostering and strengthening sisterhood mentoring. We know that mentoring is not solely hierarchical where knowledge is shared from a top-down approach. Sharing of knowledge and meaningful mentoring can occur among individuals from different ranks and can take different structures and forms. Women from various backgrounds bring unique experiences

and challenges to mentoring relationships. Recognising and valuing these diverse perspectives can enhance the quality of mentorship and foster more inclusive leadership opportunities.

Further research that centres women and women of colour utilising non-traditional methodologies is needed, such as Pláticas (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016), testimonios (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012), autoethnographies (Chang & Bilgen, 2020; Ellis & Bochner, 2000), and portraitures (English, 2000; Flores, 2017; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 2002). Exploring how strategic mentoring networks are established, carried out, and their impact, with an emphasis on women and Latinas. Leaning in to using methodologies such as Pláticas, incorporating theoretical frameworks such as CFE and RCT creates opportunities to uncover the more nuanced experiences of women with mentoring and as educational leaders.

Conclusion

The article explored the mentoring experiences of four Latina superintendents working in school districts with marginalised, predominantly Hispanic, low-income, and emergent bilingual populations, mostly along the U.S.-Mexico border. Through Pláticas—a narrative methodology rooted in Latinx feminist traditions that centres personal storytelling—this study highlights these women’s experiences of mentorship and support networks within the challenging landscape of the superintendency. What we also hope it does is to encourage further research into the many facets of mentoring and how it intersects with the superintendency experiences of Latina women.

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From Mentee to Leader: Learning and Well-Being in a Formal Mentoring Program

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this research was to investigate a formal principal mentoring program and report on perceived learning benefits and well-being of participants. The study highlights aspects of the mentoring relationship evidenced in the explicit and intentional development of school leaders. The empirical investigation used qualitative-naturalistic inquiry methods. Data were collected primarily through in-depth, focused participant interviews. The findings of this study revealed both the “what” and “how” of perceived benefits within formal mentoring relationships under the direction of a state-wide programmatic initiative. Of particular interest was the role of social learning through reflective activity and results of occupational well-being. A truthful representation of aspects of mentoring relationships between novice and mentor principals within formal programming provided insights into how novice learning supports their well-being. Implications for the development and retention of principals are considered.

Key words: Administrative mentoring, professional learning, principal development, occupational well-being

Introduction

There is a recognised demand to improve school leadership in the United States and this demand has become a policy priority for many nations around the world (Pont et al., 2008). Higher education institutions, local school districts, as well as professional associations continue to make noticeable contributions toward this goal (Childress et al., 2009; Fink & Resnick, 2001;

Gates et al., 2019). Even so, there is much work to be done. The quest for improved school leadership forces stakeholders to assess administrator preparation programs and whether school leaders are truly prepared when they accept their first administrative position. Improving school leaders also forces us to look at the types of support administrators receive once they obtain a leadership position in a school or district. Regrettably, there continues to be a lack of systematic, comprehensive support for administrators, particularly as they grapple with their internal state of well-being (Aycock, 2006; Burkhart et al., 2007; Drago-Severson et al., 2018; Villani, 2006; Wardlow, 2008).

Accentuating the lack of systemic support for school leaders is the reality of the complex and demanding role of new administrators. New policy mandates, standards, demands for accountability, and increasing complexity of the job characterise the principalship today, both within the United State and globally (Bodger, 2011; Chan et al., 2019). To assist new school administrators in addressing the demands and challenges they face, educators and policymakers must consider providing them with the necessary information and support needed to be successful in their new role. Browne-Ferrigo and Muth (2006) suggest that novice principals, to grow in their practice, require professional development based on practice expectations through mentoring, peer sharing, critique, and systematic induction. Mentoring for novice administrators may be helpful in the acquisition of practical competencies related to leadership practice (Mohn & Machell, 2005) as well as supporting their sense of well-being and development (Gimbel & Kefor, 2018).

In what is hopefully a trend toward filling the gap in professional development for administrators, the practice of cultivating mentoring relationships between school administrators is increasing in popularity across the nation (Daresh & Playko, 1989; Kutsyuruba & Godden, 2019). The Wallace Foundation (2007) reported that “roughly half of the nation’s states have now adopted mentoring requirements for new principals – a striking turnabout considering how rare acceptance of or funding for such mentoring was prior to 2000” (p. 3). And most recently, the RAND Corporation along with Policy Studies Associates (PSA) conducted a comprehensive evaluation of efforts undertaken by the Wallace Foundation’s Principal Pipeline Initiative (PPI) with the goal of supporting comprehensive school leadership improvement at scale. Part of the initiative involved principals receiving targeted mentoring support with notable outcomes in retention, work satisfaction, and positive changes in student achievement (Gates et al., 2019).

As educators who know how critical it is to have strong leadership in schools, it is important to seek out, evaluate and implement the most effective professional development models designed to achieve this goal. Mentoring is a form of professional development with great potential, as evidenced by increasing support across the United States (Clayton et al., 2013; Honig, 2012; Skinner, 2010; Wallace Foundation, 2011). In fact, mentoring is positioned as a crucial lynchpin for human resource development and organisational performance improvement and is a focused domain of intellectual inquiry and practice-based development as evidenced in the recently devised “Mentoring Micro-Credentials Program” offered by the University of New Mexico’s Mentoring Institute (MI, 2025).

This phenomenological-like qualitative study contributes to the body of principal mentoring research by building knowledge and understanding about the perceived benefits of

novice, newly incumbent school administrators' experience; particularly as those experiences are made available through a U.S. state-initiated program designed to frame and support the mentoring relationship. Therefore, the purpose of this research was to investigate a formal principal mentoring program and report on perceived learning benefits and well-being outcomes of participants. Our central research question was: What meaning making is native to participants in a formal mentoring program and how does this contribute to the well-being of novice principals?

Theoretical Framing: Adult Learning Through Social Activity

Mentoring, as a form of professional learning for novice school administrators, calls on the social-constructivist theory of adult learning. As such, there is an emphasis on experiential learning and knowledge as commonly established through inquiry, observation, experience, participation, and practice (Clark, 2001; Dewey, 1933; Engestrom, 1994, 2001; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Loughran, 2003; Orland-Barak, 2010; Tillema, 2005).

Social constructivism suggests that engaging in talk and activity about shared problems or tasks is a dialogic process of making meaning, in which individuals are introduced to a culture by more skilled members (Driver et al., 1994). Attending to experience as a core component of professional learning for adults can be traced back to John Dewey, who developed the concept of experiential growth (Dewey, 1933; Knowles, 1978).

Mentoring situates itself within a model of adult learning that emphasises learning as self-directed, experiential, and involving critical reflection by individuals who are motivated and ready to learn (Brookfield, 1996; Huang, 2002; Knowles et al., 2005). Construction of professional knowledge is initiated and sustained through ongoing, progressive discourse among colleagues as they interpret work-related situations (Edwards et al., 2002; Orland-Barak, 2010). With this, learning is grounded in a defined historical-cultural social activity (Edwards, 2011) that is interactive, collaborative, authentic, and learner-centred. Activity and experiences therefore construct meaningful knowledge in situ (Huang, 2002).

Through this learning experience, it can be hypothesised that newly officed principals will garner “protective factors” as they engage in work roles that present “ever-changing and conflicting professional demands, work-related stress, anxiety, burnout and increasing work–life imbalance” (Kutsyuruba & Godden, 2019, p. 229). As such, formal mentoring has the potential to support principals in their work and as a corollary assist them in attending to their well-being (Cherkowski & Walker, 2018). As asserted by Keyes (2002, 2003), Ryan et al. (2008) and Seligman (2011), social and emotional well-being includes both “hedonic aspects of feeling good (positive emotions) and more eudemonic (conducive to happiness) aspects of living well that entail experiences of positive relationships, meaningfulness in life and work, senses of mastery and personal growth, autonomy, and achievement” (Kutsyuruba & Godden, 2019, p. 229).

Literature

Mentoring as professional development aligns with research on socially constructed and experiential learning (Kerka, 2002; McNeven et al., 2020). It is widely regarded as a key mechanism for helping new administrators navigate complex systems (Gimbel & Kefor, 2018; Wallace Foundation, 2007) and supporting principals at different career stages (Alsbury & Hackmann, 2006; Bakioglu et al., 2010; Chapman, 2005; Smith & Arsenault, 2014). Providing support for transitioning leaders fosters growth beyond survival (Gates et al., 2019).

Emerging research supports administrator mentoring programs (Della et al., 2013; Gimbel & Kefor, 2018). A study on a southeastern Ohio program found that 70% of participants ranked mentors as the most crucial component (Howley et al., 2002). Garza (2020) further emphasised the value of formal mentoring in fostering deep reflection and authentic relationships.

Mentoring benefits mentees, particularly through leadership experiences (Thessin et al., 2020). In a survey of 92 Massachusetts elementary principals, Rodriguez (2006) found that 90% agreed mentoring helped them understand their roles, 98% saw managerial support as a benefit, and 87% felt mentoring alleviated anxiety.

A structural analysis of 300 studies found mentoring fosters learning, personal growth, and support (Ehrich et al., 2004). A qualitative case study revealed mentees valued mentoring for confidence-building, stress reduction, and feedback (Bodger, 2011). Huffman (2017) reported that mentoring enhances leadership competencies, including collaboration and personnel evaluation.

Mentors play a crucial role in administrator success, with key qualities such as active listening, diverse perspectives, and networking support (Alsbury & Hackmann, 2006). Respect, trust, and sincerity are essential (Schechter, 2014), as are communication and problem-solving skills (NAESP, n.d.; Rehrig, 1996). These qualities cultivate trusting relationships (Horton, 2020).

Mentoring also benefits mentors. Experienced administrators gain professional growth, transformative learning experiences, and renewed career engagement (Bickmore & Davenport, 2019; Schechter, 2014). Reflection on behaviours and values strengthens leadership, while mentoring fosters a sense of team cohesion, reducing isolation (Playko, 1995).

Empirical literature highlights mentoring's role in new principal support and school improvement (Sciarappa & Mason, 2014). However, programs face challenges such as coordination issues, inadequate mentor skills, and mentee overdependence (Douglas, 1997; Kilburg, 2007; Wallace Foundation, 2007). Despite these obstacles, mentoring remains a valuable endeavour, though program limitations can affect its full impact.

Methods

This study examined seven public school administrators who had participated in the Missouri Administrator Mentoring Program (AMP). Participants were selected through outreach to AMP and chosen based on their willingness to participate in in-depth interviews. Of the seven,

four were mentees and three were veteran principal mentors. They included four women and three men from rural, suburban, and urban settings.

Each participant had been actively engaged in or recently completed AMP during the 2014 academic year. AMP, a 2-year mentoring program sponsored by The Missouri Partnership for Mentoring School Leaders (MPMSL), meets an April 2005 Missouri certification rule requiring two years of district-sponsored mentoring for administrator certificate renewal (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012). The program provides new school leaders with 10 hours per year of mentor support, including on-site observations, discussions, and continuous consultation via phone and email. Extended participant interviews and transcript analysis revealed themes related to the study's central inquiry.

This research did not aim to make predictions or generalisations but sought to understand mentoring benefits through detailed, qualitative descriptions. A modified phenomenological approach within the generic inductive qualitative model (GIQM) (Hood, 2007; Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2008; Maxwell, 2005) was best suited for this purpose.

Data were collected through in-depth participant interviews and a review of Missouri AMP documents. Administrators shared their mentoring experiences, and to ensure authenticity, transferability, and replicability, careful attention was given to purposeful sampling, data collection, management, and analysis.

Preliminary GIQM analysis involved reading interview texts, AMP documents, and researcher notes to identify coded meaning statements, which were grouped into themes. Coding focused on emergent patterns, such as conversation topics, vocabulary, recurring activities, meanings, and feelings (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). Examples included: role(s), goal(s), growth, design, communication, learning (intentional and unintentional), reflection, leadership, and benefits. Emerging themes and categories were compared to identify common language threads and embedded meanings.

A cross-participant analysis of the seven cases identified shared and differing experiences shaped by local conditions. This comparative approach provided a more nuanced description and explanation (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The analysis distinguished mentee and mentor perspectives, producing a phenomenological textural description, which was then used to construct a composite portrait of the mentoring experience.

Analysis and Findings

Mentoring is a collaborative form of professional development rooted in a learning-focused relationship. This specialised kind of relationship provides a network of resources while helping new administrators instruct their craft, develop the professionalism they need, and increase the collegiality that will advance and improve teacher practice. It is a relationship in which mentors are sometimes there to listen and provide support while at other times they may interact as a coach or consultant, providing mentees with an exemplary model of the profession. As data were analysed, several emergent themes were identified that related closely to the inquiry points of the study. Emergent themes related to perceived learning were developed from

review of the data and included communication, time, leadership, and problem solving involving policy and procedure.

Perceived Learning of Mentees: Relational Communication

Communicating effectively with colleagues is of equal importance for novice administrators. The way in which an administrator communicates with colleagues is a significant factor in setting the tone and developing the culture at a school or in the district. Learning how to “work with people” was an important lesson for her mentee, one participant mentor recalled. In fact, she believed her mentee made significant growth in this area. “Working with people” means leaders in education are often faced with having challenging conversations with their colleagues. Developing expertise and building a level of comfort involves practice and receiving guidance from more experienced administrators.

The success of a school or a district depends on a strong foundation of positive relationships with all stakeholders. Building these relationships can sometimes be a challenge for novice administrators. Learning to communicate becomes central to mentee development. One participant described her learning in this way: “I’ve learned about how important communication is and however small the incident might be ...”

The ability to communicate effectively to develop important collaborative partnerships with colleagues, parents, and community members was identified by many of the participants as learning that occurred through ongoing dialogue between mentors and mentees and authentic experiences facilitated within the context of the mentoring relationship.

Perceived Learning of Mentees: Time Management

When making the transition from being a teacher to an administrator, novices who participated in the study often struggled with anticipating their new responsibilities and planning to accomplish newly acquired tasks. Because of the demands of the position, novice administrators often felt there was never enough time to accomplish everything that had to be accomplished. They often felt overwhelmed. Demands such as handling faculty and staff issues, custodial issues, cafeteria duty, and student discipline consumed much of the day. This left tasks such as required paperwork, curriculum planning, and instructional leadership for after school, which began to cut into personal time.

Many administrators expressed frustration at having to choose between staying at school to catch up on tasks or going home to spend time with family. One mentee recalled, “For me, one of the biggest things that I learned was prioritising and making sure that I remained organised and setting up timelines to get things done, and creating action plans for things that need to be addressed.” According to participants, balancing the tasks required of an administrator with family time and personal care continued to be a challenge.

Many administrators reported they learned how to be a better time manager as a result of participating in discussions and observations regarding effective time management practices. Discussion, implementing an idea, and then further discussion to debrief how the implementation went was a practical way to construct new knowledge. Learning how to organise, prioritise, and

create action plans as ways to “work smarter, not harder” were areas of focus that many administrators reported to have helped them learn to be better time managers, leading them to be more efficient at their job. Learning how to compartmentalise work and home/personal life helped with finding balance which in turn contributed to an improvement in overall mental health.

Perceived Learning of Mentees: Leadership

All administrators in this study believed that participants in mentoring programs learn about the demands of their job and how to be better leaders. Much of this learning was experienced as the result of critical reflection on their day-to-day actions and experiences. Many described developing an increased repertoire of actions as a leader. Understanding what it means to be an administrator, along with the tasks and responsibilities that must be accomplished, is an important part of role socialisation for new administrators as they step into formal leadership positions. One mentee described her learning about leadership this way:

[Learning] just the basic day-to-day dealing with situations with teachers. Determining how I can say this, determining ... well, choosing my battles. Not being so picky about certain things. Learning to live with certain things as long as they were ethically and morally ok and not always having it to be done my way ... open to feedback from teachers.

Several participants discussed the specific leadership skills they learned about such as motivating staff and being in the classroom. Much of the learning that occurred was experiential, meaning it happened as participants worked through real-life situations on a day-to-day basis. Other learning occurred through dialogue about day-to-day experiences.

Perceived Learning of Mentees: Situational Problem Solving

Administrators are faced with a multitude of daily situations for which they must decide the “best” course of action. As mentors support administrators through mentoring in context, mentees build their skills and ability to address the day-to-day challenges they face. During conversations, a mentee might ask questions such as, “How do I handle this?” or “What would you do in this situation?” All study participants noted the learning that happened regarding various everyday situations such as discipline, grading, or dress code issues. One mentee affirmatively shared that she and her mentor discussed “lots of scenarios ... what ifs ... how to handle different situations,” especially, “how to handle difficult situations.”

Many administrators reported learning about specific policies and procedures within the context of their mentoring relationship, talking rather than reading. They expressed the belief that the institutional support was very beneficial in helping them complete day-to-day tasks, such as asking a simple question, “Who do I contact?” Budgeting and finance issues and the legal ramifications of personnel issues were also topics where participants believed learning occurred.

Benefits of Mentoring as Perceived by Mentees and Mentors

Several emergent themes appeared that supplemented participants' experiences and descriptions of their learning within the formal mentoring process. These supplemental insights focused on how the mentoring relationship supported novices' well-being as they were supported in learning their job as a novice. These themes included: meaningful professional relationship, catalyst for professional learning, support, and self-reflection.

Meaningful Professional Relationship

Mentoring programs provide the foundation for creating learning-focused relationships. Life as an administrator is often a rocky road. Establishing a meaningful, learning-focused relationship helps administrators navigate the bumps, turns, and potholes in the road. The mentoring relationship is intended to provide support, to produce growth and development, and to increase expertise in a novice's instructional leadership practice. To produce the desired results of this specialised relationship, a variety of interactions must occur within the relationship. The mentor's role as a growth agent is key in the accomplishment of desired outcomes. Trust and confidentiality are key.

In many schools and districts, novice administrators do not feel comfortable asking questions of their immediate supervisors for fear of being perceived as not knowing how to do their job (Northfield, 2017). A relationship in which administrators feel psychologically safe is a critical component in creating an environment that allows them to express their uncertainty, ask questions, and think aloud. Unanimously, the study participants believed the mentoring relationship produced a safe relational environment where they could freely ask questions and seek advice.

Most study participants ranked developing mentoring relationships as important and believed that developing a relationship allows for opportunities to sit and converse about any issues that arise. Part of building that relationship is respecting the vulnerability of the mentee and the confidence building that needs to take place. Developing a relationship allows the mentor and mentee to communicate openly and honestly. It allows for the mentor to give helpful suggestions and allows the mentee to accept those suggestions, rather than interpreting them as judgement from the mentor.

Following from this relational safety between mentor and mentee, one participant explained that she learned, "how to build relationships with teachers, with administration, and with parents and the community as a whole." A mentor agreed with this view, stating that she worked with her mentee on how to develop communication skills to better "partner and collaborate" with colleagues.

Catalyst for Professional Learning

This category is different from the perceived learning identified by mentees as described above. All study participants identified the professional learning that takes place within a mentoring relationship as a significant benefit of participation in a mentoring program. Mentors

noted they supported mentees in learning how to become an instructional leader, how to manage time, how to see the big picture, and how to anticipate what was coming down the road. As many participants pointed out, there is a very real, steep learning curve that happens with new administrators. This view was held from both sides of the mentoring relationship.

Constant dialogue focused on what occurs on a daily basis is a good way to facilitate learning in practice. This accountable talk is a feature of social constructivism, implying people do not learn unless they acquire cultural tools through discourse (Driver et al., 1994; Vgotsky, 1978). Many participants talked about the benefit of the relationship as a focused learning opportunity, as well as a common learning experience. Within the context of mentoring, fair and credible feedback that is supportively formative, rather than narrowly summative, can facilitate powerful learning and a sense of meaningful mastery and growth (White, 2019).

Novice administrators noted that having the opportunity to view situations through the eyes of another, more experienced administrator was a valuable experience. One novice administrator discussed how learning to manage time more effectively helped her

to really balance, how to balance everything. And I mean, I don't think there is a magic key to that, but just knowing that other people can do it ... and some of the systems they had in place to do it I think were very helpful.

Another recalled her mentor "helped with compartmentalising work and home and being okay with walking away at certain points with what's going on at work." This administrator felt that learning through supportive dialogue with her mentor, to better manage her time, really helped with her overall mental health.

This type of social learning occurs as vicarious learning, not necessarily by observing the mentor, but by the mentor explaining their interpretations of situations and events and the mentee coming to understand another point of view or perspective and likely adopting the mentor's reality. More than one participant validated the benefit of learning from another's viewpoint, discussing how important it was to get a different perspective. For instance, Amanda shared, "A mentor allows you to look...from another person's point of view or through their eyes. It allows you to get feedback. It gives you the opportunity to learn from that person."

Across the board, all participants recommended participation in a mentoring program as a way to become better administrators while living and doing better too. Mentors in the study agreed that the mentoring relationship served as a developmental learning experience for all involved.

Framework for Support

Administrators in their early years should never be left alone to succeed or fail. But this is often the reality, causing many new administrators to leave the field in a few short years (Militello et al., 2009; Reames et al., 2014). New administrators often lack confidence and are their own worst critics. They may become frustrated because there is so much to learn, and they cannot learn it fast enough. They may become overwhelmed with the volume of tasks there are to accomplish. Stress can overtake the life of an administrator. Mentoring novice administrators through these early years provides a vital resource and support system. Mentoring can provide a

support system that keeps principals in the field while curtailing the hiring and attrition costs of the system.

Among the many benefits of participating in a mentoring relationship, all participants identified “support.” Administrators involved in the study across the board reported a feeling of being supported. This feeling of support evolved from consistently having someone to answer their questions to having someone to talk through situations. Mentees see the relationship as beneficial because they are working with a veteran who understands the heavy demands of being an administrator.

One component of feeling supported is the honesty and trust level that is built between a mentor and mentee. Feeling free to ask questions in a nonjudgemental relationship is important to novice administrators. Discussing becomes more important than accumulating ready-made answers. This is indicative of both trust and vulnerability associated with change. One participant shared that her mentoring relationship helped her know “how to deal with change” and “helping teachers and parents deal with change.”

Being part of a community and not feeling alone is important for a new administrator. Unanimously, study participants believed the mentoring relationship produced a safe relational environment. This often helps a new administrator feel like their load has been lightened or some of the pressure has been taken off them, possibly because they have developed personal relationships and a common sense of identity as they have become a member of a community of practice (Wenger et al., 2002). As a member of a community of practice, they deepen their knowledge and expertise by interacting on an ongoing basis. Community membership helps them feel as though they are no longer isolated on an island.

Vehicle for Self-Reflection

Experience is necessary, but reflection is the true teacher. One of the most powerful strategies mentors can model is how to reflect. One of the biggest things administrators can learn is how to reflect on their practice, stepping outside oneself to carefully examine oneself. This aspect of self-enhancing insight is illustrated by one participant’s reflection about the possibilities available to him through continuous improvement:

Because when you walk into a new job, especially an administration job, you’re overwhelmed, and you don’t know what you don’t know. So, I think doing it for a couple of years, by the second year you’re starting to figure out what you don’t know. You can ask the right questions and you can continue to refine your skills.

Most of the study participants identified reflection within the mentoring relationship as a clear benefit. Robert indicated appreciation for structured reflection time: “to [look] back and think things through.”

Regular debriefings that promoted critical reflection were identified by participants as being beneficial. Reflection was typically connected to topics that were chosen by the participant and was facilitated through questioning and discussion. The metacognition that occurred during the process of reflecting promoted professional learning.

Drawback of Time and Instrumentation

Participants in Missouri's AMP were overwhelmingly positive about the experiences they had. Often new administrators feel there is never enough time in the day to accomplish everything that is to be done. The feeling was confirmed in this study. Making time to meet in an ongoing mentoring relationship became an obstacle for some participants and required an intentional commitment to continuously engage. Also, ironically, there was a lack of instrumentation to measure mentee growth in the program. With the heightened emphasis on data-informed decision making in many aspects of the principal's work, participants noted this glaring omission in the program.

Phenomenological Dimensions of Learning and Well-Being Within Administrator Mentoring

Textural Description

Upon becoming administrators, participants realised how much they didn't know. While they felt excitement about achieving their goal, they also faced self-doubt and uncertainty about their new responsibilities. They experienced a separation from their teacher peers and a growing sense of isolation, a challenge often reported by school administrators (Bodger, 2011; Hansford & Ehrich, 2006).

Given the state-mandated mentoring requirement and their need for professional support, participants sought structured learning. Each piece of new knowledge brought relief but also the overwhelming realisation of how much they still needed to learn. They frequently felt consumed by the volume of new information and feared making mistakes due to gaps in their knowledge.

As learning progressed, moments of accomplishment emerged when participants successfully applied new knowledge to daily challenges. Yet, gaps in understanding became apparent in specific situations, reinforcing their need for continued learning. These realisations served as motivation to engage further.

Over time, participants became more confident, applying their knowledge practically. Learning still occurred regularly, though it increasingly addressed unique rather than routine challenges. The mentoring relationship facilitated both rapid and gradual learning, requiring ongoing attention and reflection.

Composite Structural Description

Acquiring the knowledge needed to succeed as school administrators was a top priority. Mentoring relationships served as a critical support system, guiding participants through their transition. Mentor-mentee discussions facilitated learning, addressing immediate concerns and preparing mentees for future challenges.

Reflection played a key role in this process, occurring both intentionally and spontaneously. Many mentees reflected in solitude at the end of the day, later discussing their

thoughts with mentors via phone or in-person meetings. Learning often emerged from these reflective conversations, reinforcing new insights.

Observing and interacting with experienced administrators deepened learning. Witnessing a mentor's actions in real time provided a practical understanding of leadership responsibilities. Follow-up discussions and reflection further embedded this knowledge.

Composite Portrait of Experience

Despite differences in individual experiences, all participants shared the fundamental process of gaining knowledge and dispositions through learning, contributing to their overall well-being. While mentoring was mandated, participants willingly embraced it for professional growth. The transition from teaching to administration was marked by excitement and apprehension but also served as a catalyst for learning.

Although other resources were available, mentoring provided personalised support. Learning alleviated stress while also revealing gaps in knowledge, prompting further inquiry. Mentor-mentee discussions—whether in person, by phone, or via email—proved invaluable for exchanging ideas and perspectives.

Observation and interaction strengthened understanding, while reflection was a powerful tool for deepening learning (Schön, 1983). Whether during discussions or in private moments, reflection helped participants process their experiences. Through mentoring, participants found relief from stress and isolation, gained confidence through mentor empathy, and achieved greater balance between professional and personal life.

Discussion

Mentoring has evolved as a form of professional development/learning for new school administrators as one way to fill in the gaps left by administrator preparation programs as well as offer support in their new positions (Clayton et al., 2013; Honig, 2012; Skinner, 2010; Wallace Foundation, 2011). But, do administrators who participate in mentoring programs gain new knowledge and skills to promote their success and impact their well-being?

Drawing together the findings of this study reveals both the “what” and “how” of learning within formal mentoring relationships under the direction of a state-wide programmatic initiative. Several themes related to perceived learning emerged from participants' recollection of their mentoring experiences. Participants reported that mentees learned to communicate more effectively with colleagues, parents, and community members. This was of high importance to all participants and identified as an area of difficulty for mentees. Managing time more effectively was also identified as a learning outcome. Mentees developed a better understanding of their new role as an administrator and believed they learned to be better leaders. Participants also reported learning occurred that involved situational problem-solving involving policy and procedure.

Throughout the mentoring process, ongoing, supportive dialogue between the mentor and mentee established a level of trust, which laid the foundation for a meaningful learning

experience. Much of the learning was experienced as the result of critical reflection on the part of the mentee regarding day-to-day actions and experiences. Job-embedded, authentic, and interactive learning experiences such as teacher observations or participating in classroom walkthroughs together were instrumental in developing new knowledge and skills of novice administrators. Often new learning happened as a result of conversations between mentees and mentors in which mentors shared ideas, interpretations of situations, and best practices. Mentees would then work to implement a strategy or practice and follow up with their mentor with continued reflective discussion.

Participants in the study identified what they believed were benefits of being involved in a mentoring program. Most of the participants perceived the mentoring relationship as a meaningful professional relationship, one built on trust. All mentees and mentors in the study indicated that professional learning was a significant benefit of their involvement in the program. They were unanimous in their belief that a mentoring relationship served as a catalyst for professional learning and recommended participation in a mentoring program. Mentees reported feeling very supported by their mentors and attributed the mentoring relationship as providing a framework for support and general well-being. Finally, most of the study participants discussed the mentoring relationship as a vehicle for self-reflection.

Overwhelmingly, participants in this study believed their experience in a mentoring program was a positive experience that resulted in significant professional learning. There were two drawbacks that were noted by participants. The first was the lack of an instrument to measure growth in the program. Although participants perceived significant learning occurred, there was no way to gather this relevant data. Secondly, a lack of time was a drawback identified by some participants. With so many demands on administrators, finding time to meet sometimes became an obstacle, especially when mentoring was just another layer of work on top of an already compacted workday. These challenges are evidenced in existing literature (Douglas, 1997; Kilburg, 2007; Wallace Foundation, 2007).

Summary of Study Findings

From the findings of this study, the development of communication skills emerged as an important area of learning and growth. All the study participants indicated learning how to communicate more effectively was a direct outcome of their mentoring relationship. Participants clearly identified time management as an area where learning occurred. Learning how to manage time better meant participants believed they learned how to prioritise and create action plans in order to accomplish the many tasks on their list each day. Better time management also promoted a balance between work and commitments at home, therefore improving overall mental health.

The administrators interviewed expressed a certain belief that they learned how to be better leaders. Role socialisation was an important component in their growth as new school leaders. This meant first gaining true understanding of what it means to be an administrator. It included learning how to improve instructional leadership skills and how best to support teachers and their professional growth. It involved learning about different leadership styles, finding the right fit, and encompassed how to facilitate meaningful change.

The experiences of the participants indicated they learned how to be better problem solvers, especially in instances involving policy and procedure. There was a steep learning curve when making everyday decisions. Participants reported learning about how to handle issues such as student behaviour, discipline, and dress code. There was also learning about how to handle issues with teachers, such as student grading practices and teacher dismissal. All participants reported learning how to solve problems related to policies and procedures as a direct result of their mentoring relationship. These findings tie back to the importance of viewing the learning and well-being of novice principals through constructivist, social activity explanations.

As study participants reflected on their experiences, they expressed several benefits of participating in a formal mentoring program. Establishing a meaningful professional relationship was viewed as an important benefit. All participants in the study believed the mentoring relationship facilitated significant learning and this was a huge payoff for both mentors and mentees. Learning from the experience of a seasoned veteran and being able to view situations through the eyes of another was highly valued. Mentees and mentors reported they learned how to communicate more effectively and manage their time better. Mentees also believed they increased their leadership and problem-solving skills. As a result, all participants recommended participation in such a relationship whether formal or informal.

Providing a framework for support was another benefit identified by all study participants. Having a sounding board and someone to bounce ideas off was important to novice administrators and they felt this was provided through their mentoring relationship. The fact that their sounding board was someone who had walked “in the same shoes” made the support and feedback authentic, empathetic, and more meaningful.

Reflection is an important practice that facilitates professional growth as new leaders begin to maneuver through duties and responsibilities (Hall, 2008; Trotter, 2006). Participants articulated regular opportunities for reflection as a meaningful benefit within the mentoring relationship. This happened mainly through conversations between mentees and mentors. Some expressed appreciation because of the formal nature and expectations for interaction. Within programmatic structure, the formation of a trusting relationship built on confidentiality created not only a foundation for learning but became a catalyst for the exchange of ideas. Participants’ reflections helped them determine what they could do to improve their professional practice.

There were participants who believed there were no drawbacks to participation in a formal mentoring program. Others identified the lack of an assessment measure for professional growth and finding the time to fit the mentoring relationship into an already busy schedule. Even so, those participants who identified obstacles highly recommended participation in a formal mentoring program noting that the benefits far outweighed any drawbacks.

Study Findings and the Empirical Literature

Research supports mentoring as a key driver of professional growth for new school leaders (Duncan & Stock, 2010; Gray et al., 2007; Spiro et al., 2007; Thessin et al., 2020). All study participants echoed this, unanimously recommending mentoring as meaningful professional development. As a job-embedded practice, mentoring facilitated learning in

communication, time management, leadership, and problem-solving. Participants also gained a deeper understanding of their role, consistent with findings from Grissom and Harrington (2010), who noted improved performance among administrators engaged in mentoring. Sustained mentoring may be fundamental in developing instructional leadership (Cherkowski & Walker, 2019; Davis et al., 2005; Fink & Resnick, 2001; Honig, 2012; Leithwood et al., 2004; Peterson, 2002).

A trusting mentor-mentee relationship fostered significant growth, aligning with literature that emphasises networking for leadership development (Duncan & Stock, 2010; Nicholson et al., 2005; Peterson, 2002; Pourchot & Smith, 2004). This finding underscores the importance of relationships in administrator professional development (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Grissom & Harrington, 2010; Peterson, 2002).

When trust was established, mentees engaged more fully, increasing professional growth (Bakioglu et al., 2010; Drago-Severson & Aravena, 2011; McAdamis, 2007; Reina & Reina, 1999). Collaboration with mentors was essential, aligning with research advocating collaborative experiences as key to administrator development (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Drago-Severson, 2009; Duncan & Stock, 2010; Holloway, 2004).

Empirical studies highlight the mentor-mentee relationship as the most critical element of mentoring programs (Alsbury & Hackman, 2006; Crow & Matthews, 1998; Daresh, 1995; Gehrke, 1988; Megginson & Clutterbuck, 1995). Consistent with the literature, novice administrators in this study valued their mentors' support (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004; Daresh, 2004; Lashway, 2002). They reported feeling connected and supported while navigating their new roles.

Discussion and dialogue were instrumental in learning, with mentors sharing insights and mentees engaging in problem-solving conversations (Hansford & Ehrich, 2006; Hezlett, 2005). Reflection also played a key role in development, aligning with previous studies highlighting its importance (Barnett & Mahoney, 2002; Fenwick & Pierce, 2002; Peterson, 2002; Sergiovanni, 2009; Strong et al., 2003; Zellner et al., 2002).

Mentees learned by observing mentors (Hezlett, 2005), reinforcing findings that hands-on experiences contribute to professional growth. These real-world learning opportunities addressed concerns that traditional administrator training lacks direct application (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Murphy & Vriesenga, 2004). Mentoring serves as a natural bridge between theory and practice (Grissom & Harrington, 2010).

Consistent with other research, participants cited time constraints as a challenge in mentoring (Clayton et al., 2013; Hansford & Ehrich, 2006). Managing competing priorities often made it difficult to maintain focus on the mentoring relationship.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Improving student achievement continues to be an urgent focus in the U.S. and throughout the world. Second only to highly effective teachers in the classroom, effective school leaders have the most influence on student achievement than any other related school factors (Leithwood et al., 2004). We must pay careful attention to leadership development, providing the

necessary support and opportunities for professional growth, including mentoring for new school leaders. The practice of mentoring as a form of professional development is well documented in the literature across many fields (Higgins & Kram, 2001; Kay & Wallace, 2009; Laband & Lentz, 1995; Varkey et al., 2012). Findings in this study indicate the nature of learning that takes place, as well as the benefits to well-being for participating in such a program. Specifically, new contributions to the field are the identification of benefits attributed to the general well-being of mentees because of being mentored. Very little has been reported in past literature pertaining to mentoring's role in the social and emotional well-being of mentees, except possibly for Bodger's (2011) study reporting on reduced stress and feeling less isolated. These findings have implications for school districts, universities, state departments of education, and state legislatures.

A commitment to such programs can begin with state legislatures across the U.S. and other national jurisdictions. Recruitment and retention of school leaders is a significant issue in the field of education. To recruit and retain effective leaders in our schools, states can focus on providing the support necessary for the successful transition of novice administrators to their new roles. The induction period is a critical period in the career of a school administrator.

Experiences during this time can play a large role in whether an administrator chooses to remain in the field or move on to something else. For novice school administrators to mature into successful, reflective leaders, they need to be nurtured and supported in their beginning years. In states where mentoring programs are not mandated, it is left up to individual school districts to implement this support mechanism. Unfortunately, this means inconsistent support, at best. Establishing state-mandated formal mentoring programs appears to be important if we are truly committed to the success of new administrators. Missouri's Administrator Mentoring Program (AMP) is an example of a mentoring program implemented by a U.S. state legislature for the purpose of supporting new administrators as they transition from preparation to practice and assume their roles as school leaders.

A challenging implication is the direction that state departments and ministries of education will likely face regarding resource allocation. This can be interpreted as an insurmountable obstacle, especially in current economic difficulties. Policy leaders will likely be faced with making hard choices about maintaining a commitment to providing the necessary funds to implement mentoring programs for new school administrators.

The study findings imply a need for closer relationships between universities and local school districts. There remains a gap between the way school leaders are prepared in university programs and the reality of their day-to-day responsibilities once they assume their new position. Potential school leaders need not only a theoretical foundation of school leadership, but also an equal understanding of the nuts and bolts of being a successful school leader. Leading and managing are both important skill sets for a novice administrator. Through strong partnerships, universities and local school districts can prefigure incumbent mentoring with a renewed focus on internship experiences that privilege the importance of practice knowledge and job-embedded learning for aspiring administrators.

If schools and their systems are serious about meeting the academic needs of our children and raising students to higher levels of achievement, we must create a practice of collaboration.

State legislatures, state departments of education, universities, and school districts can potentially work together to create a culture of support for education and its school leaders (Fullan, 2010).

Professional development support for new school leaders, including mentoring programs, is currently in place in many states and school districts. Even so, the existence of a mentoring program provides no guarantee that new school leaders will gain the skills and wisdom necessary to be an effective leader. Developing and implementing more effective mentoring programs to support future leaders begins with understanding whether there is meaningful learning currently taking place in established programs and if new principals' general well-being is being considered.

As we gain an understanding of what new school leaders are currently learning, and how they are learning, in such programs, state leaders, universities, and school districts can use this knowledge to plan effective mentoring models for future school leaders. Mentoring is not the only solution for supporting novice school administrators, and of course there is a range of drawbacks. However, as future generations of school administrators take on the challenge of leading schools in an ever changing, increasingly demanding school climate, formal mentoring programs show great promise as an effective professional development opportunity designed to facilitate high levels of learning and provide the support needed to ensure school administrator well-being and success.

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Transformational Coaching: Heightening Early Career Principals' Self-Efficacy in a Large Urban District

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ABSTRACT: Principal turnover is a significant issue in the U.S. and internationally, particularly for early career principals in high-poverty urban districts. Guided by Bandura's self-efficacy theory, the purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between transformational coaching and early career principals' self-efficacy in instructional leadership, and to determine principal retention over time. Using a correlational design, 91 principals in the New York City Public School system were surveyed between 2017 and 2021. The Principal Sense of Efficacy Survey (PSES) measured principals' self-efficacy of instructional leadership. Multiple linear regressions assessed the impact of coaching duration, assistant principal experience, coach type, school level, and interest in remaining a principal on principals' self-efficacy. Descriptive statistics revealed the principals' retention over time. Results confirmed that coaching, particularly years of coaching, had a significant association with principals' instructional leadership self-efficacy. In addition, principals who received coaching retained their positions at a higher level than those who did not participate in coaching. The study highlights the importance of coaching by a highly qualified trained coach and coaching duration of more than one year to improve principals' instructional leadership efficacy, and retention.

Key words: Principal retention, transformational coaching, self-efficacy, instructional leadership, coach training

Introduction

Principal turnover and its impact on schools has been a concern for nearly two decades (Finnigan & Daly, 2017; Miller, 2013). According to Bartanen et al. (2019), the 2018 NCES report revealed principal turnover at approximately 18%. Studies show that school performance and operations, along with student achievement and teacher turnover, often suffer when experienced principals leave their schools (Bartanen et al., 2019; Burkhauser et al., 2012; Levin et al., 2020). Principal turnover disrupts school policies and practices, improvement efforts, and increases teacher turnover (Mascall & Leithwood, 2010). The relationship between teacher turnover and the regression of positive student outcomes is greater in high-poverty, low-achieving schools (Levin & Bradley, 2019).

Levin et al. (2019), in partnership with the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), conducted a study of 1,500 schools in the United States. They found that the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated the working conditions for principals, and along with a lack of district supports, found that 42% of principals were considering leaving the job. While high principal turnover is not a recent phenomenon, the recent past with Covid exacerbated the situation. Over half of the principals who planned on leaving stated that the district did not offer or provide them with strategies to make proper decisions during the pandemic, nor did the districts grant them the authority to make decisions.

School leaders are most effective when they have sufficient autonomy and support in decision making (Pont et al., 2008), are able to dedicate time to instructional leadership, and create a culture of collaboration (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). Principals who are able to transform their schools into learning environments that include professional development through coaching and working collaboratively have facilitated improvement in instructional practices and shared goals (Marzano et al., 2005). Going one step further, district leadership also plays a transformational role in improving the schools by providing high quality professional development for the principals through coaching (Leithwood, 2013).

Leadership coaching is referred to as a supportive model of professional development for principals (Farver & Holt, 2015). Principal coaching has had the biggest and most positive effect in socioeconomically disadvantaged schools (Wang et al., 2024). Research has shown that principals participating in comprehensive professional development programs with features of high-quality coaching have reported a better understanding of their instructional leadership and school improvement practices (Barnes et al., 2010; Darling-Hammond et al., 2024; Leithwood et al., 2003). Coaches play an important role in strengthening the competence of school leaders and are the most desired of all professional development opportunities (Darling-Hammond et al., 2024; Goff et al., 2014; Grissom & Harrington, 2010).

Findings from a case study on the coaching experiences of novice principals conducted by James-Ward (2013) found that principals recognised the value of immediacy in being able to consult with the coach about concerns and questions. A principal was quoted as saying, "To have someone to speak to candidly and a neutral party to confide in was most helpful." Another principal shared, "Who I am as a leader has been dramatically shaped by my three years with my

coach and something that I credit as the key growth ingredient in me professionally” (James-Ward, 2013, p. 27).

Darling-Hammond (2024) identified key features of high-quality coaching, which included the following:

- expert coaches who are skilled in providing feedback and instructional support,
- coaches with specialized coaching competencies, which include establishing clear expectations and roles, developing trust, and establishing a results-based plan,
- content focused on developing principals’ leadership capacities such as setting goals, assessing needs and using reflective practices,
- appropriate fit between coach and coachee,
- trust between coach and coachee,
- sufficient coaching time,
- coach training provided by professional networks, and
- district leaders’ support for the coaching programs (p. 55).

Early career principals and experienced principals are expected to address the many challenges that face them including decreasing financial resources, while improving academic performance, engaging with teachers on instruction, empowering and entrusting teachers with collective responsibility for meeting the academic, social, emotional, and physical needs of each and every student, forging collaboration, creating a safe and productive school climate, and managing resources and personnel well (The Wallace Foundation, 2013). Effective leadership is “adaptive and responsive to the changing conditions of the school over time” (Hallinger & Heck, 2011, p. 22).

Leadership Behaviours and Coaching

What principals do to address the leadership challenges is a direct consequence of what and how they think (Darling-Hammond et al., 2024). Principals’ motivation, actions and behaviours can be explained by their self-efficacy (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004). Principal coaching has been used as an intervention for improving principals’ self-efficacy (James-Ward, 2013). The principalship challenges the self-efficacy of principals from the start of their career (Fisher, 2014). Self-efficacy, though related to self-confidence and self-esteem, is different. Self-confidence is a general feeling of competence; self-esteem is an estimate and appreciation of one’s worth (Peterson & Arnn, 2005). Self-efficacy is task-specific (Bandura, 1986; Fisher, 2014; Gist & Mitchell, 1992; Kelleher, 2016; Peterson & Arnn, 2005; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004; Wood & Bandura, 1989). Wood and Bandura (1989) noted that, “Perceived self-efficacy concerns people’s beliefs in their capabilities to mobilize the motivation, cognitive resources, and courses of action needed to exert control over their own lives” (p. 364). Self-efficacy in principals is their ability to turn their feelings of confidence and value into actions and behaviours that benefit their school community. Coaching models focus on sequences of actions

taken by coaches to guide principals through goal setting, action planning, and ongoing assessment (Crow, 2012; Huff et al., 2013).

Self-Efficacy Theory of Motivation

In 1977, psychologist Albert Bandura introduced the concept of self-efficacy, which refers to an individual's belief in their capacity to carry out behaviours necessary to produce specific performance outcomes (Lopez-Garrido, 2025). A person's sense of self-efficacy provides the foundation for motivation, well-being, and personal accomplishments (Lopez-Garrido, 2025; Wood & Bandura, 1989).

Principals operate in a liminal space, consistently navigating the ambiguity of making multiple decisions at the intersection of overlapping standards and the expectations of society, supervisors, parents, and students (Burcar, 2014). Principals lead people toward both organisational and individual goals. The principals' instructional leadership practices are constantly in view. The position requires persistence in the face of expected and unexpected challenges. This level of persistence takes a great deal of individual self-efficacy to persevere (Bandura, 1986; Bandura & Jourden, 1991; Bandura & Wood, 1989). High self-efficacy has numerous benefits to daily life, such as resilience to adversity and stress, and improved work performance and educational achievement (Lopez-Garrido, 2025).

Examining coaching through Bandura's self-efficacy framework provided a lens through which to view coaching as a strategy to enhance early career principals' self-efficacy and establish a relationship between coaching and principals' instructional leadership (Federici, 2013; Pürçek, 2014).

Embedded in Bandura's self-efficacy theory is recognising that individuals have agency in their own lives within the environment in which they reside or work (Bandura, 2012). Bandura's research suggested that multiple determinants shaped human actions and that chief among those are behaviour, cognition, and environment (Bandura, 1986; Wood & Bandura, 1989). The environment is one part of a triadic reciprocal relationship that includes behavioural, intrapersonal, and environmental factors that influence human behaviour (Bandura, 2012). This triadic relationship impacts self-efficacy, goal setting, feedback, and controllability (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 2012; Bandura & Cervone, 1983; Bandura & Schunk, 1981; Bandura & Wood, 1989; Kelleher, 2016; Wood & Bandura, 1989). Bandura's body of research shows that as self-efficacy is enhanced, performance improves. Conversely, as an individual's self-efficacy declines, their performance declines (Bandura & Jourden, 1991).

The purpose of this correlational study was to investigate the factors that contributed to principal retention through analysing new principals' self-efficacy, and its relationship with principals' coaching. Specifically, this study examined the relationship between coaches who were trained by an International Coaching Federation (ICF) accredited program internal to a large urban school system and early career principals' perceptions of their self-efficacy as related to instructional leadership. Examining coaching through Bandura's self-efficacy framework provided a lens through which to view coaching as a strategy to enhance early career principals'

self-efficacy and establish a relationship between coaching and principals' instructional leadership (Federici, 2013; Pürçek, 2014).

Highly Qualified Coaching

Supervision and instructional leadership require applying knowledge and interpersonal skills to facilitate such technical tasks as direct assistance, evaluation of teaching, building professional learning communities, providing professional development, curriculum development, action research, facilitating change, addressing equity, diversity, and inclusion, and building a caring community within the school environment (Glickman et al, 2018).

Coaching is a thought-partnership in which trust, communication, goal setting, and organisational awareness are the most critical competencies that a coach brings to the relationship (Reiss, 2007). Coaches provide a specific asset-based mindset and skillset that builds principals' self-efficacy (Fisher, 2014, ICF, n.d.; Wood & Bandura, 1989). Effective coaching focuses on the principal, where the coach builds a trusting relationship with the principal. When an issue comes up for the principal, the non-evaluative coach listens to the principal to understand their goal. The coach employs their competency-based training to develop the principal's capacity to establish, achieve, and sustain their leadership goals (ICF, n.d.).

The definition of coaching proposed by the International Coach Federation (ICF) highlights the quintessential nature of coaching:

Partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential, which is particularly important in today's uncertain and complex environment. Coaches honour the client as the expert in their life and work and believe every client is creative. (www.coachfederation.org)

This definition includes the characteristics of "pure coaching, that is, coaching which is content-free, client-led, with no predetermined outcomes" (Knowles, 2020, p. 1). In contrast to this would be coaches who usually have an agenda which is leader-led, with predetermined outcomes for how an individual should behave or what they need to do to improve their performance (Knowles, 2020).

In the New York City Public Schools, the Co-Directors of the New Principal Support (NPS) program partnered with the International Coaching Federation (ICF) to create, implement, and facilitate an ICF-accredited internal coach education program, which included a robust racial equity-centred coach education curriculum. Once the program earned accreditation, coaches who completed the requirements were credentialed through the program in partnership with the ICF. Many of these coaches were prior principals or sitting principals who wished to also coach other principals.

The New Principal Support (NPS) coach training program integrated ICF research-based Coaching Core Competencies, the Professional Standards for Educational Leadership (PSEL), and an equity-conscious coaching mindset and coaching skillset to ensure that internal coaches met the expectations of the system, the state, and the ICF, a global coach training accreditation and coach-certifying body. A racial equity-centred component that was informed by Dr. Edward Fergus's (2017) definition of equity added meaningful significance:

Equity is seeing someone differently in order to treat them fairly. The idea is that each individual has unique dynamics of how they experience society, and such experiences must be taken into consideration in defining the equitable practices necessary to achieve the desired outcome. (p. 201)

Researchers claim that early career principals who are coached by a trained ICF coach develop an increased perception of their self-efficacy, which allows them to make informed decisions on both the technical and adaptive challenges they face (ICF, n.d.; Knowles, 2020; National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015; Reiss, 2007). Adult learners want to find their new learning to be relevant and that they have some control over what and how they learn (Aguilar, 2020). Adult learners also want feedback that is specific, positive, relevant, and growth-oriented (Speck & Knipe, 2005). Trained transformational coaches are able to create those conditions for growth. Early career principals' beliefs and mindsets are able to change when they feel safe, they understand how the belief originated, they encounter new information, their core identity is preserved, they understand the benefits of changing a belief, and they recognise alternate beliefs (Aguilar, 2020).

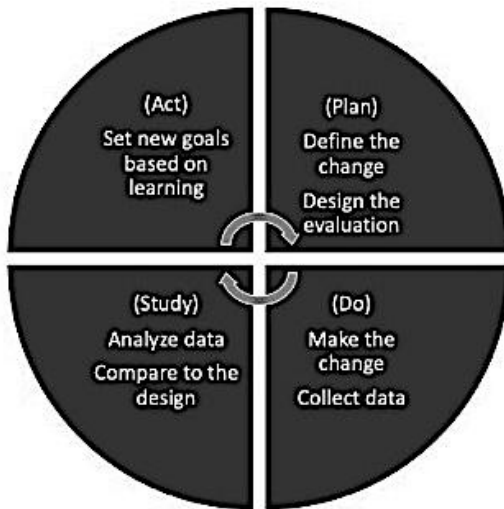
Transformational coaching is holistic, focusing on principals' behaviours, beliefs, emotions, identity, and will (Aguilar, 2020). It enhances emotional resilience, reflective abilities, and leadership skills (Bandura, 1982), enabling informed decision making on technical and adaptive challenges, and especially equity issues (Reiss, 2007). Effective equity coaching requires coaches to recognise and address inequities. Therefore, only International Coaching Federation (ICF) trained coaches participated in this study.

Trained ICF coaches understand that transformational coaching is a form of professional development for the principals. It is a structure that allows the principal to reflect, grow, and refine their practices (Aguilar, 2020; Knowles, 2020; Patrick et al., 2021). Transformational coaching is also effective because it is job-embedded (Aguilar, 2020). As it differentiates for the needs of the principal, it is ongoing and one-to-one (Knowles, 2020; Patrick et al., 2021). Allowing the principals to reflect on their practices helps them to understand themselves better, shift their beliefs and mindsets and build new habits (Aguilar, 2020; Knowles, 2020; Patrick et al., 2021). As new habits are built, the principals' self-efficacy increases.

Many transformational coaches, when coaching a principal, follow a method of improvement science described as a Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycle of inquiry (Bryk et al., 2021), shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Components of a Coaching Session and Link to PDSA



Note. Adapted from *Learning to Improve* by A. S. Bryk, L. M. Gomez, A. Grunow, & P. G. LeMahieu, 2021, Harvard Education Press, p. 122. Copyright 2021 by Harvard Education Press.

Four steps are carried out repeatedly to answer new questions as the principal's inquiry grows. First, the principal defines the challenge and the desired plan to address the issue. Predictions are made as to what might happen. The principal also designs a method to test the change for effectiveness. Secondly, the plan is carried out and data are collected to document the change that was implemented. Next the data are analysed and compared to the predictions that were made. Finally, the decision is made of what to do next; stay with the plan or make an adjustment (Bryk et al., 2021). While this planning takes place, the transformative coach is working side-by-side with the principal. First, the coach listens and seeks an understanding of the principal's challenge. Secondly, the coach guides the principal to identify the root causes of the challenge and explore the mental models that may have contributed to the problem. The coach also gathers a variety of data to help the principal see any impacts on staff or students (Aguilar, 2020). The coach also guides the principal to identify and reflect on how the problem may impact the students, the teachers, or themselves (Aguilar, 2020; Knowles, 2020; Patrick et al., 2021). Next, the coach encourages the principal to acknowledge, accept, and understand the emotions related to the problem. The coach continually communicates an acceptance of the principal's emotions. (Aguilar, 2020; Krasnoff, 2015). Finally, the principal discusses her/his new beliefs and way of being, to create new behaviours. The coach helps to co-plan, observe, and offer feedback, analyse student work together, etc. These conversations build resilience, reflective abilities, interpersonal relationships, and skills (Aguilar, 2020; Knowles, 2020; Krasnoff, 2015; Patrick et al., 2021).

Coach Types

In the large urban school district investigated in this study, there were three types of coaches, as is shown in Table 1, Full Time Coaches, Coaching Fellows, and Master Principals. Each type received a different number of coach training hours. Full Time Coaches received 125 or more hours of coach training; Coaching Fellows between 60 and 90 hours, and Master Principals between 30 and 60 hours. Full Time Coaches left their principalship, joined the district coaching team, and their coach education and support was on-going. Coaching Fellows were sitting principals who left their schools for one school year, participated in coach training, and coached first-year principals. Master Principals remained sitting principals, participated in coach learning, and coached three new principals.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for the Independent Variable Coach Type

Descriptive Statistics				
	Coach Training Hours	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Master Principal	30 – 60 Hours	21	7.21	1.25
Coaching Fellow	60 – 90 Hours	34	7.51	1.25
Fulltime Coach	Over 125 Hours	25	7.57	1.13
Total		83	7.25	1.67

A coach employs a process through which the coachee establishes goals and develops action plans to achieve those goals. The ICF defines coaching as “partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential” (ICF, n.d.). An early career principal coach supports new principals to develop their own leadership style. Coaches apply a coaching mindset and skill set to elicit the principals’ goals and action steps (Pürçek, 2014).

Principals’ perceptions of their self-efficacy link directly to their decision making (Bandura & Wood, 1989; DiPaola & Tschannen Moran, 2003). Principals serve as their schools’ chief executive officer and instructional leader, where decisions regarding equity practices must be made on a daily basis (Daresh, 2007, Fullan, 2015).

The principalship is both complicated and complex; it is complicated in that it requires supervision of managerial tasks, instructional leadership responsibilities, and the Professional Standards for Educational Leadership (PSEL) expectations. It is complex in that it requires the collaboration of multiple stakeholders to support student achievement through equitable practices. Principal coaches provide the job-embedded support for early career principals to lead teachers and support staff through the complicated, and complex mandates and requirements, while the principals develop their self-efficacy as instructional leaders. However, there is a gap in the literature that exists examining how early career principals’ instructional practices are enhanced

by increasing their self-efficacy through coaching (Bartanen et al., 2019; Dhuey & Smith, 2018; Grissom et al. 2021; Huffman, 2017).

Bandura's research on self-efficacy illustrates its importance, both positively and negatively, on performance, persistence, goal attainment, and ability to utilise feedback (Bandura, 1986; Bandura & Wood, 1989; Wood & Bandura, 1989). Qualitative research has explored how principals perceived their self-efficacy through experiences (Celoria & Hemphill, 2014; Celoria & Roberson, 2015; James-Ward, 2013; Rhodes & Fletcher, 2013). There is a limited number of quantitative studies that explore the relationship between transformational coaching and school leaders' instructional self-efficacy (de Haan et al., 2013; Fox, 2018; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). In addition, little research has been found on the relationship between coaching and principal retention. In order to add to the quantitative research, the researchers investigated the following research questions:

1. What is the relationship between the years of ICF coaching, years of experience as an assistant principal, or coach type (Master Principal, Coaching Fellow, Full Time Coach) and early career principals' perceptions of their self-efficacy related to their instructional leadership practices in a large urban school district?
2. How does the school level (elementary, middle, high school) or years that early career principals are interested in remaining principals relate to their perceptions of their self-efficacy of their instructional leadership practices in a large urban school district?
3. How do the retention rates compare for principals receiving coaching and not receiving coaching?

Methodology

The current study was a correlational, non-experimental design to investigate the relationship between ICF coaching and principals' perceptions of their self-efficacy related to instructional leadership practices. The setting for this study was the New York City Public Schools. The target population was 456 principals who were assigned a coach between July 2017 and June 2021. The sampling design utilised convenience sampling of principals who voluntarily returned the *Principal Sense of Efficacy Survey* (PSES), which measured principals' self-efficacy of instructional leadership ($n = 91$). The sample size met the expectation for a medium effect size with a power of .80 for a correlational study (Cohen, 1988).

There were five independent variables including years with a coach, years as an Assistant Principal, coach type, school level, and years of interest in continuing as a principal. The dependent variable was the principals' perceptions of their self-efficacy related to instructional leadership practices.

The New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) provided the researcher with data that included the type of coaches, the amount of coach training each type of coach received, the number of new principals, and the email addresses for the new principals. In addition, the retention data were collected on all new principals, both those that were coached and not coached. After collecting this information, the researcher sent the PSES survey instrument to the participants via email. The data collected were then used to investigate the research questions

that met the criteria for a research study: feasibility, clarity, and significance (Fraenkel et al., 2015). The researcher sought and received permission from the survey authors, Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2004), to modify the PSES to include the phrase: "In your current role as principal, to what extent do you believe coaching has helped you to..."

Multiple linear regressions were run for research questions one and two. Descriptive data were used to determine frequencies and percentages for research question three. Prior to conducting the analyses, the data were screened, and the six assumption tests were run to determine if the data were appropriate for the multiple regression statistical analyses. Two models were run for each hierarchical multiple regression analysis.

Findings

Hierarchical multiple linear regressions were run using SPSS for research question 1. The results for the outcome variable of principals' perceptions of their self-efficacy of instructional leadership practices showed a significant regression equation in Model 1 (years as an assistant principal and years of coaching) $F(2,80) = 3.477$, $p = .036$, which accounted for 8% of the variance of self-efficacy in instructional leadership ($R^2 = .080$, adjusted $R^2 = .057$). The number of years of coaching that principals received showed a statistically significant relationship between principals' perceptions of their self-efficacy and instructional leadership practices ($B = .529$, $p = .022$) with a unique contribution of variance of sr^2 of .063 or 6.3%, with an effect size of Cohen's $f = .086$, which is considered to be small. This finding indicates the importance of continuing the coaching relationship for more than one year. The years of being an assistant principal did not show a significant association. The null hypothesis was rejected.

In Model 2, which included the type of coach, there was no significant regression equation found $F(5,77) = 1.551$, $p = .184$. Although the type of coach did not show a significant association, the Full-Time coach type with 125+ hours of coach training had the highest self-efficacy mean ($M = 7.57$, $SD = 1.128$) while the Master Principal coach type with 30–60 hours of coach training had the lowest mean ($M = 7.21$, $SD = 1.248$), as is shown in Table 2. While this mean difference is slight, it is evident that the hours of coach training that the coach receives does make a difference in the principals' perceptions of their self-efficacy of instructional leadership practices.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics for the Independent Variable Coach Type

Descriptive Statistics				
	Coach Training Hours	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Master Principal	30 – 60 Hours	21	7.21	1.248
Coaching Fellow	60 – 90 Hours	34	7.51	1.246
Fulltime Coach	Over 125 Hours	25	7.57	1.128
Total		83	7.25	1.577

The results of research question 2 which investigated if there was an association between school level and years that early career principals are interested in remaining principals and principals' perceptions of their self-efficacy of instructional leadership skills showed no statistical significance. The null hypothesis was retained.

For research question 3, descriptive statistics were used to determine if there were a difference in the retention rates over time when comparing for principals who received coaching and those that did not receiving coaching. The results are listed in Table 3.

Table 3

Three-Year Comparison of Retention Rates for Principals Receiving/Not Receiving Coaching

	Total First-Year Principals	Not Coached	Not Coached Retained	%	Coached	Coached Retained	%
2015-2016	186	125	112	.90	61	57	.93
2016-2017*	135	28	22	.79	113	106	.94
2017-2018	144	20	19	.95	124	119	.96
Three-Year Average				.88			.94

Note. *This was the year that NPS coached 95% of the first-year principals. From 2014–2016, the program was building to scale.

The descriptive statistics in Table 3 display several different findings. In the school year 2016–2017, 95% of all first-year principals received coaching. The retention rates for the average of three years, 2012–2015, was 87% for the coached principals, compared to only 80% of the non-coached principals. In the following three years, 2015–2018, the average retention rates for coached principals increased to 94% while the average for the non-coached principals increased to only 88%. The data indicate that principals who received coaching retained at a higher rate than those principals who did not participate in coaching.

Limitations of the Study

There were several limitations evident in this study. As a correlational study, the lack of a control group limits the generalisability of the results. In addition, the Principals Sense of Self-Efficacy survey was sent to 456 principals with the small return rate of 20%. The researcher sent follow-up email reminders to complete the survey, but to no avail. The results of this study affect the external validity of the study, as the results could only be generalised to a similar coaching program in a similar urban school system.

The statistical conclusion validity may have been violated due to the random heterogeneity of the survey respondents. There may have been idiosyncratic characteristics of the participants which may have inflated the estimate of the error variance and resulted in not rejecting a false null hypothesis.

Recommendations for Future Research

While the current research study collected data for six years, the coaching program was not in full effect until the 2017–2018 school year. It is recommended to continue the research collection, including the use of the PSES to determine the effectiveness of the coaching program based on the years that principals received coaching. Retention rates should also be collected, and a longitudinal study conducted. Comparing the effects of principal coaching on student proficiency scores would also add to the research.

A mixed methods study would add to the research to find out how the coach perceives the coaching relationship with the coachee, and the perceptions of the coachee. Surveys, interviews, and observations could be included in the study.

Conclusion

The principalship has substantially changed over the past few decades (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003; Fullan, 2015; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004). Principals are now expected to be both effective managers and instructional leaders (Grissom & Harrington, 2010; Grissom & Loeb, 2011). Research has identified certain factors where schools are more vulnerable to principal turnover, such as high-poverty schools (Beteille et al., 2012; Grissom et al., 2018; Steinberg & Yang, 2019), schools with greater numbers of students of colour (Beckett, 2018), schools that are academically struggling (Burkhauser et al., 2012), schools located in large cities and rural areas (Taie & Goldring, 2017), larger schools (Goldring & Taie, 2018), and schools located in rural areas. In summary, principal turnover negatively affects not only student achievement, but also teacher retention, and school climate (Grissom et al., 2021).

The Professional Standards for Educational Leaders ([PSEL], American Institutes for Research, 2016) are the current foundational metric for principals' performance. The standards require that effective principals manage school operations and resources to promote each student's academic success and well-being, and to ensure that effective educational leaders act as agents of continuous improvement to promote each student's academic success and well-being. Meeting these expectations requires far more support than traditional principal preparation programs provide (Davis et al., 2005; Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012; DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003; Mendels, 2016; Perilla, 2014). Principals need to continue to develop their self-efficacy (Fisher, 2014; Wood & Bandura, 1989). The multitude of job responsibilities leads principals to feel overwhelmed (Burcar, 2014). The feeling of being overwhelmed contributes to decreasing self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986; Bandura & Jourden, 1991; Peterson & Arnn, 2005; Wood & Bandura, 1989).

For early career principals to meet these expectations requires on the job support to develop their self-efficacy (Daresh, 2004, 2007; Fisher, 2014; James-Ward, 2013). Research shows that early career principals must receive ongoing, individualised support (Bloom et al., 2005; Daresh, 2004, 2007; Sciarappa & Mason, 2014). However, it remains an open question whether the principals receive the type of support to facilitate their self-efficacy across the multiple leadership expectations that are required for the demands of the principalship (Anderson & Turnbull, 2019; Goff et al., 2014; Grissom & Harrington, 2010; Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004). The current study demonstrated that principals who had more years of working side-by-side with a trained transformational coach had stronger perceptions of their self-efficacy in instructional leadership practices.

One matter which requires further study is to identify what impacts early-career principals' management skills. The non-significant result of the current correlational study between principals' perceptions of their self-efficacy of their management skills and the variables chosen for the study demonstrated that more research needs to be conducted in this area. Most principal preparation programs focus on supervision and instructional leadership (Glickman et al., 2018), and do not address management tasks. Dalton and Arpon (2024) investigated principals' management skills which included technical, conceptual, human relations, resource generation, fiscal management, and networking skills and found that overall, school principals possess the necessary management skills to govern a school. In addition, they found no significant relationship between management skills and academic achievement. Grissom et al. (2015) found that supporting principals' time management abilities may be a worthwhile strategy for increasing time on high-priority tasks and reducing stress. Future research is needed in this area.

The current study aligns with a hard reset in educational leadership. As educators, we need to see desired improvements in principal leadership, instructional practices and equity leadership. That hard reset, at least in part, should include a shift in mindset and approach to supporting school leaders. Coaching is a relatively new and different approach to job-embedded support for early career principals (Daresh, 2007; Sciarappa & Mason, 2014).

Coaching from an ICF trained coach, whose values include a commitment to supporting principals with ongoing personal and professional development through nonjudgemental interactions, collaborates by fostering joint creativity and resourcefulness. ICF coaches create authentic relationships with the principals that support honesty, dignity, transparency, and clarity. Through the discussions, the coaches help the principal to reflect on equitable processes which support the principals' perceptions of their self-efficacy of instructional and equitable leadership (Grissom et al., 2015; ICF, 2017). Principals need to have strong self-efficacy in order to make the tough decisions that are required during times of social and political upheaval and collective trauma. With the support of a trained coach, principals are given the opportunity to handle that "hard reset" and to make effective decisions that are needed to run safe and equitable schools, both in times of crisis and in day-to-day. Coaching early career principals in a large urban school district has provided evidence of stronger self-efficacy that facilitated breakthrough instructional leadership for just and equitable schools.

Competing Interests and Funding

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New Teacher Mentoring in a Culture of Overload: Perspectives From Appalachian Principals

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ABSTRACT: Rural poverty can overwhelm principals' capacity to mentor new teachers, along with novice adjustment and student challenges. In response, this pedagogical case study examines new teacher mentoring/induction in rural areas as understood by three veteran principals of an elementary, middle, and high school. The purpose of the study was to learn how principals interpret as well as operationalise formal mentoring/induction across a school division. The question for this original research was: Among principals' practices that are evidenced in rural, high-poverty, Title I schools, what does new teacher mentoring/induction look like from a leadership perspective? Data for the larger study were derived from face-to-face interviews held in 2024 with 17 principals, assistant principals, and lead teachers at 10 elementary, middle, and high schools. Located in rural Appalachia in Virginia, United States within a single division, the schools were expected to follow a centralised mentoring/induction policy. Both researchers conducted all interviews, and coded and qualitatively analysed interview transcriptions. Job-embedded mentoring for novices from an equity lens necessitates adjusted workloads to promote learning and retention. However, due to the daunting nature of community issues, staffing shortages, and testing pressures that contribute to a culture of overload, a belief these principals held was that "everyone has to pitch in equally." Reflective activities include the New Teacher Mentoring Activity Template.

Key words: Equity, leadership, new teacher, principal, rural Appalachia, systemwide mentoring/induction

Introducing the Case Study

Rural poverty can overwhelm principals' capacity to mentor new teachers, along with novice adjustment and students' out-of-school challenges. In response, this pedagogical case study examines new teacher mentoring/induction in rural areas as understood by three veteran principals of an elementary, middle, and high school. The purpose of the study was to learn how principals interpret as well as operationalise formal mentoring/induction across a school division within the context of their instructional leadership aspirations and responsibilities. The question for this original research was: Among principals' practices that are evidenced in rural, high-poverty, Title I schools, what does new teacher mentoring/induction look like from a leadership perspective? Our orientation to the research we conducted fits with (a) exploratory case study, which clarifies a unique context where information is limited (Quintão et al., 2020; Yin, 2017), and (b) studies concerned with novice teacher struggles and administrators' influence on retention. While Martinez (2019) focused on new teacher adaptation and obstacles from the viewpoint of a novice high school teacher, our study attends to the principal perspective, thus contributing to knowledge in mentoring and leadership, particularly within rural contexts.

Teachers are the backbone of schools, but they are leaving or retiring early at unprecedented rates (Ingersoll & Tran, 2023). In the United States, the attrition of new and mid-career educators is a primary reason for national shortages; annually, schools "must hire tens of thousands of teachers" (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017, p. 1). Overwhelmed and unsupported, many new teachers not only exit their schools but the teaching profession altogether (Bullough, 2012). Up to 50% of teachers in the nation's schools resign during their first 5 years (Hobson, 2021; Sasson et al., 2020). In 2022, teacher turnover across districts was 15 to 30% and higher in low-income schools, reported as 21% in 2016–2017 (Buckman & Sloan, 2022).

In rural Appalachia, school divisions and communities have small, dispersed populations, with prominent community bonds. Residents are more homogeneous and economically stressed than other rural counties in the U.S., which affects their educational opportunity (Drescher et al., 2022). In these high-poverty schools, over 75% of students have low socioeconomic status (SES) and are eligible for free and reduced lunch (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020).

This article highlights another vulnerable population—the new teacher in Title I, high-poverty, rural schools that receive federal funding to support low-income student populations. Over 75% of the student population is eligible for free and reduced lunch in high-poverty (high-needs/low-income) schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). In Title I schools where at least 40% of the student population is from low-income families, allocated funding supports achievement through schoolwide programs designed to benefit all groups (Cox & Mullen, 2023).

Intervening Through Systemwide Mentoring

Regarding key definitions, formal mentoring/induction across a school division or district, guided by centralised policy, is known as *systemwide mentoring* (Mullen, 2025; Mullen et al.,

2022; Smithey & Evertson, 2003), which is our focus. It depends on *formal mentoring*, expected by states and/or districts. Formal mentoring requires participation; pairings are arranged; and activities are organised within sponsored, planned programs. Policy expectations are set by a higher authority (department of education, etc.), and supervisors adopt mentoring as a relational and programmatic tool for meeting organisational goals (Mullen, 2025). At the school level, practitioners interpret and implement centralised policy, although not all know how to operationalise mentoring guidelines; in the U.S., this type of mentoring is implemented in a school district or division, overseen by a school board and led by a superintendent (Mullen, 2025). Most preK–12 public elementary, middle, and high schools function as units of local school districts, which range in size.

Adaptation to teaching is essential because teachers directly affect learning outcomes (Ruitenburg & Tigchelaar, 2021), yet it is difficult to acclimate in a culture of overload with poor morale (Mullen, 2025). “Workload stress,” confirmed Jerrim and Sims (2021), is a driver of the “recruitment and retention crisis” (p. 1). Stress can undermine well-being and performance, particularly in struggling schools and times of crisis. Impacts from constant worry are profound in disadvantaged schools, making stress management crucial for reducing inequities (Greenberg et al., 2016). Discontentment fuels attrition (Harmsen et al., 2019), lowering student and school outcomes (Greenberg et al., 2016). Moral distress is also rampant among principals (Walls & Seashore Louis, 2023) who, ideally, manage teacher stress through good mentoring.

Consequently, induction that reduces stress, increases retention, and improves teaching can be impactful (Ingersoll, 2012). Even in normal times, new teachers find classroom instruction difficult and stressful (Harmsen et al., 2019). Entering jobs with knowledge gaps, they must still function independently as professionals. Novices’ complaints target workload and inadequate guidance for planning lessons, managing student behaviours, and understanding key assessments and policies (Harmsen et al., 2019; Kratochwill et al., 2011). Mentoring inequities also arise when access, services, resources, or opportunities are not properly distributed (Mullen, 2025). Imbalances or biases that hinder relationships, work, or well-being can fuel departures (Harmsen et al., 2019). Novices want to be seen, heard, and treated fairly (Mullen, 2025).

Mentoring/induction helps teachers avoid burnout and discouragement, lower stress, and ease employee onboarding, which can disrupt patterns of attrition and boost preparedness (Furlow, 2019; Harmsen et al., 2019). Before the pandemic, novices reported behaviour problems at high rates, based on a survey of 500 novices (Kratochwill et al., 2011). Work overload has since been more acute in systems that are slow to recover. Likely, many new teachers do not feel prepared to deal with the realities of teaching, worsened by chronic absenteeism (Mullen, 2025).

Not all U.S. states offer mentoring/induction programs, even though novices benefit from them (Furlow, 2019; Mullen, 2025). Consider Goldrick’s (2016) review of novice teacher induction policies. Only 29 states required support for novices, and far fewer made support obligatory in their second year. Without administrative care, oversight, and investment, recruits are twice as likely to quit or leave the profession (Carver-Thomas, 2018). Principals make all the difference. They oversee the work of novices, ensuring that high-quality professional development and learning (PDL) is both ongoing (Ingersoll, 2012) and equitable (Mullen, 2025). Feedback supports growth and enculturation (Harmsen et al., 2019) by helping recruits

understand their strengths and continuously improve. Retaining novices in the first 3 years is crucial, and teachers make or break experiences for students (Ruitenburg & Tigchelaar, 2021). Career *and* psychological needs are satisfied in programs aligned with mentees' preferences, identities, and factors (e.g., race) (Mullen, 2025). Principals are expected to develop staff in a psychological and social manner, known as psychosocial mentoring (Kram, 1983).

Mentoring is an important strategy for improving schools and retaining beginning teachers, according to researchers and policymakers (Kardos & Johnson, 2010). Employers are responsible for mentoring success, but this is a historic impediment for many new recruits. The most popular mentor practices from 24 sources (see Gaines, 2020) indicate that academic achievement is mentors' priority. Student work and data are associated concerns. Effective communication of subject matter and content in the classroom was a concern of teacher mentees within a Texas district's mentoring program (Haidusek-Niazy et al., 2023). However, mentor teachers are expected to evaluate their mentees in inductive contexts geared around narrow performance metrics—a source of contention in mentoring research (e.g., Mullen, 2025).

Method and Case Context

Institutional Review Board approval was obtained in June 2023 from the home university's ethics committee (protocol #21-459) and the school division in March 2024. Participants received the study information, with confirmation that nonidentifiers would be used. All electronically signed the informed consent and voluntarily participated. They could withdraw at any time. (The invitation was sent to eligible parties via the superintendent.) Interview data were collected in April 2024.

A case study research design was used, following the logic that this type of methodology is empirical inquiry (Yin, 2017). In our interpretation of this design, we have investigated a phenomenon (systemwide mentoring/induction) within a real-life context (rural school settings) and, as such, explored complexities by analysing scenarios and instances.

In response to centralised mentoring policy, for the larger study, interview data were obtained through face-to-face interviews at 10 K–12, high-poverty, Title I schools in a rural Virginian school division. Both researchers interviewed 17 principals, assistant principals, and lead teachers: 9 principals (3 elementary, 3 middle, 1 preK–8, 2 high); 6 assistant principals (1 elementary, 2 middle, 1 combined, 2 high); and 2 lead teachers (1 elementary, 1 high). Demographically, they were in their role for at least 1 year, White, male (12)/female (5), and from the geographic area. (Scheduled interviews with three additional leaders were cancelled while we were waiting in their school's office.) Questions about support for new teacher mentoring and equity were asked of principals, assistant principals, and lead teachers as a strategy for examining mentoring through principals' vision, practice, and impact. School practitioners voluntarily participated in the interviews conducted by a professor of educational leadership and special educator, both White female veteran professionals. Here, we concentrate on a thread in the school data to elucidate aspects of new teacher mentoring and equity. The complete data set illuminates multiple facets of principal instructional leadership.

Our semistructured interview protocol Principal Practice, Mentoring, and Impact was distributed 7 weeks in advance of interviews, which took place in March 2024, and presented again at each session. (Some participants arrived at the appointed interview with jotted notes for each question prompt, whereas others did not have the protocol with them.) Prompts for principals included: (a) What practices do you use as the principal to impact new teacher mentoring and equity? (b) What inequities in the school do you face or manage? Assistant principals and teachers were invited to respond to reworded versions of these questions from their perspectives: What practices does the principal use to impact new teacher mentoring and equity? What inequities in the school are being faced or managed? We did not name any principal practices or describe mentoring/induction concepts or processes on the protocol or during interviews, helping to ensure authenticity in the responses.

The individual interviews lasted 30–60 minutes and were digitally recorded. (One interviewee decided to submit responses to our prompts via email after being called away unexpectedly.) The school visits necessitated a 3-hour drive each way from the first author's home and a 3-day stay in the area. This commitment reflected her desire to break away from Zoom interviews imposed by the global pandemic in favour of a fuller interviewing experience of professionals in their local work environments. The coauthor (interview partner) was conveniently located; raised and educated in the area, she possessed rich local knowledge.

Interviewees' demographic data (race, gender, years in the current role, subject expertise, etc.) and biographical (education, where they grew up, etc.) were gathered at each session. All identifiers were removed; schools were assigned a letter and each participant a number.

Transcriptions were generated via the transcription tool in Microsoft 365 and verified as accurate by participants. Transcribed records were analysed by both researchers whose handwritten notes for the interviews and school observations were typed and incorporated into the analysis. Starter codes included *accessibility*, *achievement*, *collaboration*, *equity*, *mentoring/induction*, *new teacher*, *policy*, and *support*. Participants' frequency of use was coded and, importantly, the context in which these words/phrases were used, together with implied meanings (Younas et al., 2022). These were culled from the research question and literature. While coding, organic codes (e.g., *checking in [with new teachers]*, *data-driven practice*, *family–community*, *foster care*, *special education*) were amassed. Unusual and special situations were documented separately, such as a principal's schoolwide practice of using data binders for every student and personally guiding all teachers to develop a data mindset. Colour coding and categorically aggregating the data in Microsoft Excel spreadsheets led to themes and findings. Analysis followed established qualitative procedures (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Miles et al., 2020) and “contextual coding” practices (Younas et al., 2022).

Our case study's validity and reliability were increased through the use of several strategies outlined by Quintão et al. (2020): (a) researcher bias and subjectivism were minimised in the field in that one of the interviewers (the first author) was an outsider unknown to the participants; she was neither employed by the division in which the interviews were conducted nor a resident in the area; (b) interview transcriptions, researcher notes, and a photo archive were sources of evidence. The researcher notes were produced independently and compared, which served to generate different perspectives on mentoring and equity from an academic and practitioner (the authors). This process led to a precise, comprehensive set of fieldnotes that we

enhanced with the use of contextualised information from our photo archive (e.g., data files, program documents, mission statements, school awards). People were not photographed; the images, strictly private, served as a visual aid for recalling details. With the use of these strategies, our investigator perceptions broadened and deepened, and were more trustworthy (Yin, 2017). We also established triangulation by using multiple data sources and conducting interviews at three different sites and school levels (Quintão et al., 2020; Yin, 2017).

Composites of real people and schools were created, with pseudonyms used. The participant quotes appearing throughout the case narrative were obtained from our analysed interview data. The first author wrote the cases and article, reviewed closely by the coauthor who created the interview schedule. Next, we transition to our elementary school case (principal Drew), followed by a middle school (principal Fallon) and high school case (principal Bryce). Mentoring supports for novices were more apparent at the elementary and middle sites. Through the eyes of three veteran principals, tensions will be seen in the effort to implement novice mentoring within an environment overwhelmed by student needs. In 2024, 43% of students in Virginia were participating in federal assistance programs (Pope, 2024), with high concentrations of children from low-income families in the rural district that provided access for our interviews.

Principal Drew at Cardinal Elementary School

In this award-winning school, Drew, a White female who had been Cardinal's principal for 12 years, shared aspects of her mentoring and modelling. She valued a data culture where information is on hand to guide individualised lessons and other pedagogical decisions.

Principal as Coach

Drew assigned herself the role of coach years ago to mentor all faculty and was intentional about using a respectful, collaborative style: "I found from talking constantly to teachers that I had to coach them. You can't force it. They must see success just like kids do, so I was in their classrooms a lot." Another mentoring resource was reading and math coaches: "That is an impactful thing that will help a child—having an awesome teacher train a teacher who's going to impact many kids."

This career principal was also mindful about monitoring mentoring assignments: "We assign every novice a mentor. We check in on these novices, and I check in every week. A new teacher is struggling with classroom management, but she's acting on every piece of advice." On that day, the principal had helped her with engaging learners in a lesson. Drew noted, "Many novices find management and engagement difficult." Under her watch, they are not simply left on their own. Rather, the principal and mentors "hold the rookie's hand": "When we see novices struggling, we're in their classroom modeling, releasing them, and letting them teach." Drew added, "It may be 6 weeks or a full year before we feel that teacher is ready to be on their own."

Like all Drew's teachers, the novice was coached to think of student learning as "data driven." As such, there was a high level of attention on struggling students, and classroom data were tracked to pinpoint what specific skills needed targeting: "You must know where your kids are at. Lots of people say they're data-driven, but they're not, and this is a must." The

pedagogical challenge of using data to determine each learner's progress seems to fall to the principal: "That is 100% on my shoulders because when I ask a teacher, 'How's little Johnny doing?' and they reply, 'Great,' I want to know, 'What does great mean?'" She continued, "We have awesome teachers, but they don't understand data. We've taken baby steps, and they talk about data now." When coaching, Drew incorporates data binders: "I create a data binder with lesson plans for every teacher. Our pass rate is 98% on state tests in reading. We look at skills students are missing, not letting ourselves off the hook by seeing them as 'disadvantaged.'" To promote a literacy-rich environment, Drew ritualised the use of data binders to monitor each individual's literacy development and areas needing growth. The binders contained test scores, spelling inventories and stages, grade-level modules, sight words, and more. To reduce student absences, teachers were guided by the principal to "remediate and have parents check in."

After describing her mentoring approaches, Drew reflected on her leadership: "I'm not a micro manager in the classroom. I see how novices are teaching and take snapshots of what's happening. We look at the data binders together to see if their kids are making progress." A decade ago, Drew slowly introduced the binders, starting with the lower grades and working her way through the campus, and including binder training in beginning teacher socialisation. She believed that struggling learners' progress is an opportunity for growth as well as celebration with families. Failure, she said, is an opening for pursuing alternate paths. Hence, novice teacher development, according to Drew, necessitates a growth mindset.

In a tightly woven peer structure with role models, new teachers learn to think differently. Daily, they consult their data binder to monitor areas of student performance needing improvement and interface with their principal and colleagues. Drew tracks "every student's reading and math levels, and all gaps. Small-group interventions cover the gaps." All novice teachers participate in these conversations. They learn about the principal's practices and are enculturated to learn alongside mentors to understand policies and strategies for building student skills.

To Drew, teacher time should be wisely spent with students: "Lots of our kids aren't meeting reading or other benchmarks but get that extra attention from their teacher." Specialised reading instruction in small groups also showed teacher initiative: "Failure is not an option. We're going to use our read-aloud the way we're supposed to and meet with that child to address their needs so they can be reading." Mentoring succeeds when novices exhibit desirable behaviours and student skills advance: "We track our strugglers and praise those who improve."

Mentoring as Instructional Leadership Practice

Drew viewed her mentoring program as "an instructional leadership practice" dedicated to student learning outcomes and embedded within a "culture of improvement." Effectively mentoring novices was an important, impactful practice of principals: "My first leadership practice is to make sure I have high-quality teachers. To do that, I use my reading and math coaches and lead teachers to model, demonstrate, and guide all our new or struggling teachers." Drew largely attributed retention to "supporting novices": "I'll say to our new hires, 'What do you want, and how can I help you?' Just hearing that from a principal is incredible." She also said that classroom management is the "most difficult skill" for recruits.

Student Needs Take Precedence

“Basic needs” competed with achievement and classroom testing. Caring for children in need meant that a “fine-tuned matching with a teacher” was in order; however, “people outside these small communities don’t understand many things.” In this case, the strategy involved teachers becoming “a leader on how life is before they can even begin the education part.” This resulted in “teachers caring for students—feeding and getting them to school.” Child abuse was approached with sensitivity: “We just had a student kept up all night with relatives’ drug-dealing and fighting. I don’t want to send these kids home. If they can’t focus at school, we let them sleep here and get ready for the day.” Such basic needs must be met before formal learning can begin.

Attendance incentives made guardians responsible for ensuring that their child was at school. This principal was dedicated to locating students who had missed the bus or were absent and, if possible, having an adult drive them to school. No one on her staff saw the pick-ups as inconvenient or disruptive. Many parents lacked transportation, so this service was a necessary measure that applied to every student enduring transitional homelessness and in residences without quality care. Learning from teachers and doing educational activities was an imperative.

Principal Fallon at Dogwood Middle School

Dogwood’s principal for 15 years, Fallon, a White male, also described mentoring practices in his building: “I believe the greatest leadership practice is hiring the best available teacher candidates. You have the ability to impact their teaching in their first 2 years, especially if they’re a rookie and young.”

Novices Should Be Moulded

Fallon saw the purpose of induction as “mentoring and moulding rookies into what you want them to become or what you think they should be.” Instructional leadership practices used to socialise recruits included meeting about “instructional issues.” Large meetings “are unproductive,” he uttered, “so we meet at the grade level at least monthly.” This school had “an informal leadership team to which each grade elects a leader and examines what is and is not working instructionally.” These teams gather without the principal: “I don’t need to be involved in every instructional conversation; my style is to delegate leadership by setting the tone and expectations.”

Mentoring/Induction Is Structured

The school offered two types of structured mentoring: “It doesn’t matter if you’re a year 10 or year 1 teacher, we have a formal program in which teachers meet monthly and a new teacher program. The rookies all have their own mentor, a veteran teacher.” These meetings are run by “a lead teacher who covers lots of things, and it works well.” The lead teacher, borrowed from our division, guides teacher and student development: “She’s wonderful with this

mentoring program, seeing to it that we produce good citizens, not just good scores. Built-in activities enable rookies to succeed inside the classroom.”

Not all mentors bear fruit in this program, so Fallon intervenes: “Is it bad to say that I remove mentors? Some are naturally great at it, others not. The same two get used every year because they work at it.” This weeding of underperforming mentors was a leadership strategy, he said, for ensuring mentoring competence and quality. He knew when mentors influenced student outcomes: “If they’re benefitting teachers, they have to be benefitting students and achievement, right?” Admitting to a lack of quantitative evidence to support his claims, he added that novices with the best mentors “always turn out to be good teachers” relative to benchmarks. Effectively mentored novices propel “student progress toward annual goals and discipline,” and “rookies learn how to handle discipline, which is a huge part of middle school.”

Principal Bryce at Swallowtail High School

Bryce, a White male with 3 years as Swallowtail’s principal, saw his school as a disenfranchised place of learning burdened by outside forces.

A Coal Mine Culture

The local community originated from coal mine families: “Appalachia has always been where hardworking people have been the manual labor of the place. Many of our impoverished kids are from communities in the coal camps.” Low-income housing units were commonplace. Children in low SES home environments and unhoused individuals received extra food from local feeding programs, even though breakfast and lunch were provided to all students via the county’s Community Eligibility Provision.

Many children at Swallowtail “live with foster parents, aunts, uncles, and grandparents,” stated Bryce. Indeed, signs were posted in the community urging residents to foster a child, but “there aren’t enough foster families. Unfortunately, many do it simply for money, and there is high turnover.” At the school “kids are carefully matched with the right teacher.” One child may need nurturing, another structure. Some teachers even had clothing on hand for students.

“Low SES is something we battle,” Bryce declared, and “many of our parents don’t have transportation.” In response, his family engagement coordinator uses a three-tiered system to bring together the school, students, and parents: “We educate our parents on what’s happening at school and in ways they can take home with their kids and teach them.” The coordinator met with parents to “talk about curriculum and assessments to help them feel part of their child’s learning.” School-level oversight of parent involvement and education may have bolstered novices’ ability to focus on teaching.

Work Overload Was Chronic

At this site, “staff play many roles—nurse, doctor, minister, psychologist, coach, bus driver—anything that needs doing.” “Everyone has to pitch in equally,” he stated neutrally. Bryce lamented that “overloading employees” with different roles was unfair: “We are spread so thin—increasingly in education we’re doing multiple jobs.” Pandemic education was alluded to:

“Virtual learning, a teacher stressor, could not have been fair to kids either.” Turnover in the building was chaotic, and there was no replacement for a teacher who suddenly quit.

An inadequate emphasis on formal education in families was another equity barrier. Children in homes with low interest in education were contrasted with families that had demonstrably high interest. An equity-steeped scenario concerning discipline and disruption sprang to mind: “When new kids come in and disrupt things with their parents, the impact is huge.” He used a policy addressing attendance boundaries and geographical jurisdictions to make tough decisions like removing extremely disruptive students. Someone who brought “mean drama” had to leave this school: “We accept everybody, but you’ve got to follow the rules.”

Viewing family influence as “strong from birth,” Bryce tied work overloads to attitudes and socialisation in the home: “We have students with that strong family influence, which is like a boulder—you can’t chisel through no matter how hard you try. You can sense where their future is going.” He said these dynamics produce inequities at school. Students and families lacking interest in education “create an inequitable learning environment” for children who want to learn and achieve, and for their parents who support them. A compensatory move was to instil confidence in teachers’ abilities: “I support the integrity of their structure so they can teach, which is why I’m not too involved in the classroom.” He added, “Isn’t that what good parents do for their kids and governments for citizens?”

Special needs populations were concentrated at Swallowtail: “We take students with disabilities [SWD] as far as we possibly can in special education and with regular classroom teachers. They give up their planning time to do remediation and put in extra time without compensation.” The school’s most glaring inequities were said to involve “absorbing high numbers of SWD—we’re way above national norms.”

Multiple measures were employed onsite to elevate inclusion, including dedicating teacher planning time to helping SWD; fostering equitable learning opportunities; increasing daily remediation sessions; targeting and individualising instruction; driving students to school; providing food and, as needed, meals on weekends; and leveraging community resources. Relatedly, verbal appreciation of employees who performed such extra duties was a strategy for maintaining a “positive school culture”: “When parents compliment teachers, we share the news.” It is unknown whether a culture of recognition was something teachers experienced.

The state’s formula for chronic absenteeism was “missing 10% of school, regardless of the reason.” Bryce saw it as rigid considering the plight of many children who consecutively missed school days for such unavoidable reasons as protracted illnesses, hospitalisations, and homelessness: “The chronic absenteeism formula counts unexcused and excused absences the same,” and in an environment with “lots of economically disadvantaged kids, so something’s got to change.” He contrasted situations that disrupt continuous attendance at school, but for very different reasons: “We have a student with major medical issues who missed 65 days and is in a self-contained class but gets thrown on the chronic list, versus a student who went camping for 5 days.” Chronic absenteeism, rural poverty, and disrupted family units overwhelmed life at Swallowtail. Rapid teacher turnover and low morale were other issues. All such dynamics overshadowed the mentoring/induction of new teachers within a high-stress environment, compounded by the belief that novices’ energies had to be directed at helping students.

Teaching Notes

In challenging sociopolitical environments that leave rural schools particularly disadvantaged, any teacher novice will benefit from investments in their adjustment to organisational life and performance at work. Principals seeking to have strong onboarding and induction practices will want to ensure that their processes are supportive, accessible, collaborative, and equitable. A core interest is the development and well-being of novices on behalf of every child: What support do new teachers need? How can induction practices be more accessible and collaborative? How can the experience be more equitable for mentees and mentors? Inequities and inadequacies in novice mentoring can be rooted in mindsets and range widely from heavy workloads, homogeneous participant characteristics, ill-suited pairings, limited or sporadic mentoring activities, and unsatisfactory mentor compensation. How might leaders model and monitor fairness in new teacher mentoring, and attend to novices' growth?

School inequities (teacher overloads, etc.) were certainly named, but systemic challenges were primarily ascribed to external forces. Notably, all 9 principals (from the larger participant pool) criticised the state's chronic absence formula, one of whom shared that other states have shifted away from the rigid stance or adjusted the benchmark. To clarify, in 2024, 40 U.S. states were still using missing 10% (18 days) of a school year for any reason to identify chronic absence (Attendance Works, 2024). Pervasive chronic absenteeism has made attendance a top priority for this rural school division.

Challenges linking the three cases were (a) a wider culture of overload in a national staffing shortage affecting rural schools; (b) out-of-school stressed conditions impacting students and staff—job scarcity, children in foster care, single-parent homes, displaced or unhoused, lack of reading and tutoring away from school, developmentally delayed learning, and extreme disabilities; and (c) the state's use of chronic absence as an accountability measure for school improvement and student performance. The latter did not sit well with these leaders, who judged it callous toward adverse child exigencies, which ranged from illness to special needs and parental neglect or abandonment. Making struggling divisions answerable to the state's assessment program was disparaged: "They put so much emphasis on state testing and chronic absenteeism that we forget about the student, when my whole career is about caring for kids."

These leaders understood that personnel as a whole were subjected to systemic overload. Catalysts were troubled home situations, cultural poverty, staffing shortages, and unforeseen variables. Swallowtail High's principal considered poverty a root problem in rural Appalachia. Student needs, in combination with out-of-school constraints, likely overshadowed new teacher mentorship. This case was included because it underscores a particular perspective—the need for all members of a school staff to be fully involved in the well-being of students enduring severe hardship, where all other concerns are of secondary importance. Mentoring/induction and the socialisation of new recruits, including their own needs, were thus reduced in importance.

Overworked employees, teacher turnover, stressed systems, family influence, disability, and standardised testing were topics occupying the nine principals. Consequently, equity and quality in the socialisation of novices did not figure prominently in their narratives. Fairness as a principle and human right was more readily thought of in terms of students, especially those with special needs and living in extreme conditions. Attending to students was an all-consuming priority.

Specific mentoring supports for novices were more apparent at the elementary and middle sites where coaches were assigned from the division. Other supports included grade-level common planning, PDL activities, and the principal's open-door policy. Intentions were to "help newer teachers get mentoring," "keep up morale," and "give teachers autonomy." Expectations were high—"novices were also held accountable to state test scores." Cardinal Elementary's principal characterised her leader behaviours as "approachable, open, honest, and ready to listen," and not hesitant to have "difficult conversations" with underperforming novices.

At Dogwood Middle, a leadership team was in place, one per grade level. The principal seemed proud of this structure, describing it as energising shared governance and teacher autonomy, promoting teacher-teacher and teacher-administrator rapport, and enabling collaborative data review. But only some novices were matched with exemplary mentors. This apparent inequity in the annual matching process was a disservice to recruits paired with unremarkable teachers. A staffing shortage could have contributed to the gap in equity. Whether the principal's practice of removing and retaining mentors by fiat was an issue among staff was an unknown.

In these three schools, the pandemic's blow to the "social development" of staff was a concern. Principals said they understood the value of "mental and physical wellness" and "self-care for teachers." One added, "We need time to reflect and do things for ourselves, but this need is ignored." Psychosocial mentoring would have offered a means for focusing on mentees' sense of identity, ability, and effectiveness (Kram, 1983).

In a culture of recovery, most of these principals were still able to describe active teacher supports and PDL initiatives, including whole-faculty needs. But it was hard for them to think of the new teacher as a singular demographic with specific needs, which accounts for the inaction around adjusting their load. Instead, they emphasised workload equality, which does not seem consistent with mentoring strategically to make the workplace more equitable and novices adaptive.

Perhaps the principals had little knowledge of the details of new teacher mentoring on their campus and as codified in policy. In contrast, Drew was heavily involved, which was not a response to attrition; in fact, her state-recognised school excelled at many things, including retention. She coached her faculty, having observed that they did not understand how to enact achievement as baby steps or use data to support instruction. She also mentored them as mentors.

A data management system that tracks assessment information and student progress in core content areas was in use at all three schools. The middle school principal maintained a spreadsheet for test scores, tutoring, remediation, and more. "Teachers already have enough to do," he uttered, explaining that he created the system to "track all kids and make it easy for faculty to fill in data." Teachers enter data for "someone who is at risk or not proficient," such as the skill(s) covered in a help session. Other staff consult these data profiles to decide next steps.

In two (of three) schools featured, mentoring supports were apparent for recruits and all faculty, such as math/reading coaches, lead teachers, and specialists. In Drew's words, "They visit our school to make sure required curriculum is taught, and they support our students and analyse our data." Learning conversations with teachers, another strategy, focused on "implementing instructional practices" in their classrooms, supporting them in this endeavour, and "holding them accountable."

Limitations and Delimitations

This case study was limited by (a) self-reported data; (b) participation from one school division in a single state and country; and c) a lack of detail about mentoring supports for new teachers at the high school site, despite interview probing. As delimitations, principals (including teachers in the larger study) made time to share their perceptions about mentoring in context.

Conclusion

Frequently, new teacher mentoring focuses on induction and navigating a system without paying much attention to helping students. Our research implications offer mentoring and induction researchers an opportunity to attend to students as the primary consideration of mentoring/induction and beneficiary of interventions. Relatedly, contextual and cultural influences in highly stressed environments, like those storied here, may provide more “explanatory power” for understanding mentoring dynamics in extreme situations (Haidusek-Niazy et al., 2023).

Accordingly, with the out-of-school pressures on these schools, we were left with the impression from our field work that principals’ wholesale attention was on students and the equitable supports and special assistance needed by many. If indeed these principals were requiring “everyone to pitch in equally,” it would follow that teachers’ willingness to mentor novices could have been compromised. As narrated, daunting challenges confronting these schools included staffing shortages, community conditions affecting student learning, and the state’s chronic absenteeism policy. Contributing equally to the school’s operation as a new teacher was a central point we raised across the cases, as well as a source of debate. Not understanding the need for equitable teacher workloads and contributions potentially impacts morale and mentors’ motivation to assist novices with adjusting to a school’s culture and developing their teaching skills.

While there was less attention on new teachers in the data, varied approaches were still taken to socialise recruits, mostly in the elementary and middle schools. A tension concerned leaders’ capacity to manage severe challenges for students while easing novices into life in a rural school community. We also problematised the underwhelming consideration given to novices, a vulnerable population in this context. Beyond a centralised mentoring policy, division-level resources, and school practices, it appears that principals could have made novice induction and adaptation more of a priority, especially at the high school level. Finally, more cases on new teacher mentoring connected to school leadership and culture are needed, particularly in rural areas. Mentoring is crucial for helping novices with the support, guidance, and development they need to experience success, well-being, and longevity in the field. Principals’ role in ensuring that novice teachers receive meaningful mentorship is important.

Reflective Activities

These activities can be used to spark meaningful dialogue in PDL contexts.

1. ***Compare and Contrast.*** Compare and contrast the situations in these three schools. Dimensions of interest in this regard include the school-based mentoring programs and particular aspects of them, such as structure, process, and activities, in tension with the challenges confronting the schools, such as staffing shortages, community conditions affecting learning, and the chronic absenteeism policy.
2. ***Map Out-of-School Conditions.*** Map conditions—geography, racial-ethnic demographics, economic conditions, etc.—that potentially impact schools and their educational opportunity (as a resource, see Drescher et al., 2022). Build on these results by considering strategies for delivering high-quality mentoring to novices. For this activity, consider a school district in your own region or elsewhere. Generate a resource list that schools could potentially consult.
3. ***New Teacher Mentoring Template.*** Assume the role of a new teacher, mentor, or principal (see appendix). If you are a teacher or an administrator, how might you portray a workplace mentoring program from the viewpoint of these roles? Begin with the first prompt on the appendix and move through the others. Identify such information as (a) stakeholder roles and responsibilities, (b) institutional structures and program processes, and (c) benefits and omissions in mentoring for novice teachers. Share what you learned to better serve your school community through such means as targeted PDL for recruits, mentors, or principals. Alternatively, use the template to talk with stakeholders in a setting of interest.
4. ***Quality of Mentoring/Induction.*** Identify a school situation and describe novice teachers' experience with mentors. Use "simple dichotomies": "Do [the novices] have mentors or not; teach in the same subjects or not; are they observed by their mentors or not; do they [talk] with their mentors [about challenges, etc.] or not?" (Kardos & Johnson, 2010, p. 40). Allow the "simple dichotomies" motif to guide PDLs to address inequities in mentoring processes. Adapt the questions for educational leadership preparation programs or other settings.
5. ***Systemwide Interventions.*** Learn about induction within systemwide contexts beyond this case in readings (e.g., Mullen, 2025). What might be strengths and limitations of school-based, district-embedded mentoring on new teacher self-esteem, effectiveness, and retention? Are research-informed induction/mentoring policies in place in both the district and schools?
6. ***Equity Understandings.*** Reflect on equity in novice socialisation. Consider equity versus equality as a measure of mentoring/induction health in the cases presented. With regard to equitable workloads, PDL opportunities, and resource access, did you notice any differential support to, or attention on, new teachers? What were principals' priorities in these portraits? Compare your results with colleagues and analyse all perspectives. What actions might all parties take to improve mentoring in

a school, especially as these concern novices and their retention? Has this activity increased your awareness of equity in mentoring?

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Appendix

New Teacher Mentoring Activity Template

New Teacher	Mentor	Principal
1. Describe the mentoring program.	1. Describe the mentoring program.	1. Describe the mentoring program.
2. What practices in this program shaped your experience?	2. What practices do you believe support the mentoring of new teachers?	2. What practices do you believe support the mentoring of new teachers?
3. What have you been learning?	3. What training did you receive?	3. What is your role in this program?
4. Has experience informed your commitment to stay at the school?	4. In what ways does the principal support mentors?	4. What is your process for selecting mentors and creating matches?
5. What role does the principal play in your program?	5. How did you work with novices to (a) learn the school culture, (b) create positive relationships, (c) plan content lessons, and (d) manage the classroom?	5. What might you change about the mentoring process in your school?
6. Has your mentor helped you in the program?	6. What might you change about mentoring teachers?	6. What outcomes would you like to see for new teachers?
7. What might you change or add to the program?	7. What might you like to share about mentoring novices?	7. What might you like to share about mentoring novices?
8. Has COVID-19 affected your experience of support in this program?	8. Has COVID-19 affected your experience of support in this program?	8. Has COVID-19 affected your experience of support in this program?

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Unconscious Gatekeepers: Mentor Bias, Dispositions, and the Shaping of Teaching Careers

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ABSTRACT: Our previous research has revealed a compelling paradox in teacher development: while teachers believe that “great” educators possess certain dispositions in the ontological domain (who they are), official standards, such as the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (the Standards), predominantly focus on the epistemological domains of teaching—what teachers must know and do. This disconnect forms the foundation of this study, which examines how these beliefs infiltrate mentorship relationships and potentially shape the careers of Early Career Teachers (ECTs). As the global shortage of teachers persists, it is timely to consider the impact of unconscious gatekeepers on the profession.

The Standards, like many similar frameworks, emphasise knowledge and skills, sidelining what teachers consider paramount: the ontological domain of the educator's personhood, manifested in specific dispositions (like enthusiasm, and passion for working with young people) and the human experiences that teachers bring to their work which, while important, may remain hidden from others. This misalignment between official standards and practitioner beliefs and identities creates a fertile ground for unconscious bias in mentorship contexts.

Our research delves into how mentors' assumptions about these dispositions—often vaguely defined yet deeply held—significantly impact their interactions with and evaluations of mentees. Through research based on a mixed methods approach, we uncover a pattern worthy of deep reflection: mentors, while believing in their ability to support all mentees equitably and relationally, demonstrate unconscious biases that lead them to assume the presence or absence of certain dispositions and capabilities in ECTs. These assumptions profoundly influence the mentorship experience.

The implications of these findings are significant. Without addressing unconscious biases, mentorship programs may inadvertently perpetuate existing inequalities and limit the diversity of teaching approaches in our schools. Furthermore, early mentorship experiences have long lasting effects, influencing professional formation and retention.

We propose a framework for “disposition-aware mentorship” that encompasses individual and system change. Current mentor programs tend to focus on the standards with vague inclusions on building rapport. Enabling engagement with self and social awareness through a transformative pedagogical approach, our framework privileges the exploration of professional identity that begins with the mentor.

By implementing these strategies, we aim to influence the development of more equitable and effective mentorship experiences that support the growth of all ECTs and challenge the unconscious bias present in mentors' preconceived notions of the “ideal teacher.” This work can be furthered through interrogation of the systemic structures where placement pressures and convenient pairing have historically avoided issues of authentic mentor expertise and inclination.

This research contributes to the broader discourse on teacher development by highlighting the often-overlooked role of dispositional beliefs in mentorship. It calls for a reimagining of mentorship programs and professional standards that acknowledges the importance of dispositions while seeking to mitigate the impact of unconscious biases.

As the profession grapples with teacher shortages and the need for innovative approaches in education, addressing the gap between perceived dispositional requirements and official standards emerges as a critical lever for change. This article illuminates a significant challenge in current mentorship practices and also offers a pathway towards more holistic, equitable, and effective support for future educators.

Key words: Unconscious bias, mentoring, teacher education, professional learning, dispositions

Introduction

This empirical study investigates the complex interplay between mentor bias, teacher dispositions, and professional standards in shaping the careers of Early Career Teachers (ECTs). Drawing on data from a pilot Mentoring program offered to schools partnered with a university's Initial Teacher Education (ITE) program, we examine the dissonance between mentors' stated beliefs about teaching and their unconscious biases regarding teacher dispositions. Our research employs a convergent parallel mixed methods approach, utilising surveys, open-ended responses,

and focus group transcripts to uncover the subtle ways in which mentors may act as unconscious gatekeepers in the profession.

Constructions of “the teacher” evident in teacher standards such as the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (the Standards) (AITSL, n.d.) have the power to influence mentorship relationships and thus shape the careers of Early Career Teachers (ECTs). Teacher standards are the product of the reductive lens of neoliberal education reform that prioritises skills and knowledge transmission over the lived experience of practitioners and their students, who understand teaching as a fundamental human endeavour (Taylor, 2021b). As a consequence, the teaching profession finds itself at a point of inflection, caught between the notion of “the teacher” evident in teacher standards frameworks, which prioritise epistemological knowledge and skills while largely overlooking the ontological dimensions that teachers themselves believe is quintessential to being a great teacher (Dall’Alba, 2023; Laughter et al., 2022). This epistemological focus (what a teacher must know and do) is reinforced in reports produced by government and statutory bodies. For example, the Australian Government’s Issues Paper (DoE, 2021) advocated for investment in induction and mentoring focused on the Standards (AITSL, n.d.). The recommendations of the Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group (TEMAG, 2014) report resulted in a complete realignment of Australian Initial Teacher Education (ITE) to prioritise core content knowledge in the programs of ITE providers, derived from the Standards (DESE, 2021). Various reports have called for well-structured, skill focused, and theory-integrated practicums which are supported by quality mentoring and collaboration between universities and schools. There is nothing unsound about this in principle. Binding ITE to the Standards alone, however, valorises the epistemological over the ontological dimensions of teachers’ work. This is a problem—with respect to mentoring—because it narrowly frames and limits the conception of what might constitute quality mentoring. The narrow framing of mentorship can have unintended consequences that make mentorship less like support to develop the careers of teachers and more like gatekeeping that can place barriers in the ways of some who might otherwise become great teachers.

Mentorship of teachers, which supports them to sustain purposeful careers in the profession, has been brought into sharp relief by teacher shortages and the associated issue of poor teacher retention (Caudal, 2022). We face a contemporary moment of profound pressure on teacher attraction, retention and attrition (AITSL, 2022b; JSA, 2024). Longmuir et al. (2022) highlight a workforce that feels psychologically unsafe, overworked, undervalued and emotionally drained, and exhausted, with a majority of teachers stating they would not recommend teaching as a career. Carroll et al. (2022) echo this, examining the impact of intrapersonal and environmental factors on reported levels of stress and burnout, while Madigan and Kims’ (2021) findings make connections between teacher levels of low well-being and poorer student outcomes. These trends are further supported by the Australian Teacher Workforce Data which identifies 90% of the reasons for teachers and school leaders considering leaving prior to retirement are related to workload and coping. The same data also note that early career teachers report a decrease in induction opportunities leading to concerns around mentoring more broadly, and transition into the profession specifically (AITSL, 2022b). There is little evidence, however, that current attempts to address teacher workforce shortages have had

existential positive impacts on the profession. These realities invite a revisiting of assumptions of mentorship in ITE programs and early career transition in order to map the ways in which more deeply understood mentorship might contribute to greater teacher retention and satisfaction.

Early mentorship experiences have long lasting effects, influencing professional formation and retention (Ambrosetti & Dekkers, 2010). Such experiences are facilitated by experienced teachers who undertake the often underpaid and under-resourced task of mentoring teacher candidates. They do so in an environment which constructs their mentees' work as solely bound to skills and knowledge as presented in the Standards. This is limiting, as it fails to take account of teacher dispositions which teachers themselves consider important in the "becoming" of a teacher. Following Fonseca-Chacana (2019), we understand dispositions to be "the cultivatable set of intellectual, intrapersonal, and interpersonal attributes that enact teacher knowledge and skills to the service of a professional community, which includes students, student families, and other education professional" (p. 269). Creating greater transparency of the importance of teacher dispositions in the development of teacher candidates and early career teachers has the potential to raise mentors' awareness of its influence on their mentorship work. Mentors, more aware of what would otherwise be unconscious influences on their work, are themselves, then, supported to reflect on a broader conception of not just what makes a teacher, but who a teacher can be—to think in more diverse terms about those they mentor. A balancing of professional skills and knowledge with teacher dispositions that engender success and longevity in the profession has the potential to reframe the way in which mentors approach their work. It has the potential to positively impact on teacher retention by attracting and retaining a more inclusive and diverse workforce. A more inclusive and diverse workforce provides opportunities for meaningful innovation and change within the profession. In this way, teachers can influence the way education is currently offered, breaking free of the current single loop response to a wicked problem (Rittel & Webber, 1973).

Praxis as part of an ITE degree is both an essential aspect of professional formation and a learning experience highly valued by participants (Izadinia, 2015; Kuhn et al., 2022). During this time of professional experience, teacher candidates work with future colleagues in an authentic setting, guided by a mentor teacher who, ideally, reflects the qualities of an expert teacher (Anderson & Taner, 2023). Assessment requirements in the practicum, however, are often narrow, focused on successful transmission and observation of knowledge and skills rather than supporting the exploration of purpose and potential (AITSL, 2022a; Hobson & Malderez, 2013; Larsen et al., 2023; Manderstedt et al., 2022). The requirement to assess teacher candidates' abilities present in the practicum experience against the Standards has the dual impact of focusing only on epistemological evidence while also potentially hiding the dispositional bias that may unconsciously influence the assessment results. If education is to cultivate human potential rather than engineer compliance, praxis evaluation needs to shift from its current pragmatic and reductive state, and better reflect the altruistic and intrinsic motivations framing teacher candidates career choices (Deschênes, 2020; Goller et al., 2019; Manuel & Carter, 2016; Simonsz et al., 2023; Watt et al., 2012). The nexus of unconscious bias, the Standards and dispositions are present in the mentoring dyad but are unrecognised by the current curriculum found in mentoring programs (AITSL 2022a).

The role of dispositions in teacher education and teaching more broadly is an emerging area of research, investigating the notion of self-concept and vocational identity (Taylor, 2016). Dispositions are the psychosocial state which facilitates successful mentoring where both the mentor and mentee are fully present in a professional relationship that is itself in the service of education. Greater self-awareness, reflection, openness, and growth orientation support mentors to surface, identify and examine their dispositions so that they encounter the mentee from a place of genuine curiosity, empathy and potentiality.

Through our empirical investigation, we aim to shed light on the mechanisms of unconscious gatekeeping in teacher mentorship and propose a framework for more inclusive and effective mentoring practices. By examining the gap between mentors' stated beliefs and their unconscious expectations, we contribute to a deeper understanding of the barriers facing teacher candidates and ECTs, particularly those from diverse backgrounds. This research is situated within the context of global teacher shortages and retention challenges, offering insights that can inform more equitable and supportive practices to enhance teacher retention, professional confidence, and diversity in the teaching profession.

Background

Mentorship, professional standards, and dispositional qualities play a pivotal role in shaping teacher identities and career paths (Cruickshank, 2022; Doecke et al., 2010; Nigar, 2024; Nigar, Kostogriz, Gurney, & Janfada, 2024; Taylor, 2016). However, mentorship frequently carries unconscious biases that intersect with the Standards (against which mentors judge teacher candidates and ECTs), and mentors' awareness of — though loosely defined— notions of the importance of dispositions (Taylor, 2016); unconscious bias that can significantly impact teacher candidates' school-based practicum experiences. This phenomenon, which we refer to as unconscious gatekeeping, subtly reinforces institutional hierarchies and identity expectation, creating barriers for teacher candidates who may not fit the assumptions held by practising teachers (Peeler & Jane, 2005). In Australia, the Standards, governed by AITSL (n.d.), primarily focus on technical and epistemological skills, often overlooking dispositional attributes, which unintentionally results in the underemphasis of cultural competencies and awareness of biases.

In this context, the issue of teacher retention further underscores the importance of effective mentorship and support systems. For example, a study on ECT attrition in Western Australia highlights the critical need for standardised metrics to accurately profile attrition trends (Wyatt & O'Neill, 2021). Key findings reveal that ECTs in secondary education are more likely to leave the profession compared to those in other educational fields, with support during induction playing a significant role in retention. In other studies, the role of induction and mentoring and the key aspect of feeling welcomed into the profession are crucial aspects of ECTs' sense of belonging and well-being (Manuel & Carter, 2016; McClure, 2022). These findings emphasise the necessity of structured, culturally aware mentorship and systemic approaches to improve retention rates, address institutional challenges (Wyatt & O'Neill, 2021), and consider alternative futures.

Building on these findings, the literature highlights significant gaps within standardised frameworks which often overlook relational and dispositional qualities essential for inclusive mentorship (Cruickshank, 2022; Doecke et al., 2010; Nigar, 2024; Nigar, Kostogriz, Gurney, & Janfada, 2024; Taylor, 2016). While structured professional standards aim to ensure accountability and skill development, they frequently fail to address the nuanced needs of diverse cohorts of teachers or to tackle the complex ways that unconscious biases manifest in mentorship contexts. In contrast, models that prioritise cultural awareness, and relational and affective mentorship qualities appear better suited to foster professional identities (Nigar, 2024; Peeler & Jane, 2005; Viete & Ha, 2007; Viete & Peeler, 2007; Yan, 2021). This underscores the need for an expanded understanding of mentorship frameworks that integrate emotional intelligence, bias awareness, intercultural capabilities, and dispositional support into professional development.

Intersectional Challenges and Unconscious Bias in Mentorship and Professional Standards

An intersectional approach to mentorship is essential to address the compounded challenges faced by teacher candidates and early career teachers. Nguyen (2019) highlights the importance of addressing intersecting biases, including those based on race, language, and gender, which together can pose significant obstacles for teacher candidates and early career teachers as they navigate professional standards. Nguyen's (2019) exploration of intersectional challenges within mentorship is further supported by Larsen et al. (2023) who argue that intellectual virtues and relational readiness create a framework where mentors and mentees can engage on equal footing. Taylor's (2016, 2021b) critique of compliance-focused frameworks like the Standards, underscores the limitations of rigid mentorship models, further emphasising the need for mentorship practices that prioritise relational qualities and cultural awareness.

In Australia, Nigar, Kostogriz and Gurney (2024) discuss how biases in teacher recruitment related to race, language, gender, and cultural background significantly affect the professional identities of non-native-English-speaking teachers, often leading to psycho-emotional impacts and self-marginalisations that hinder career progression. Larsen et al. (2023) highlight similar issues within standards-driven mentorship programs, arguing that such frameworks can inadvertently perpetuate biases when diversity awareness is insufficiently addressed. They advocate for mentorship models that integrate intellectual virtues, such as empathy and cultural competence, into their approach, emphasising that these qualities enable mentors to recognise and appreciate diversity (Curtis & Larsen, 2024).

Mentors hold significant influence over teacher candidates and early-career teachers' professional growth, yet unconscious biases within mentorship can act as invisible gatekeepers, subtly affecting mentees' confidence, career trajectories, and access to opportunities (Nigar, 2024; Posselt, 2016). These biases often impact culturally and linguistically diverse educators who may encounter stereotypes linked to their language, accent, novice status, or cultural background (Peeler & Jane, 2005) as well as presenting challenges for the mentoring relationship when the teacher candidate does not "fit" the unconsciously held idea of what a teacher is. Peeler and Jane (2005) underscore the need for mentors with an equity-focused knowledge base, promoting a bi-level and multi-domain approach that allows mentors to address both teacher and student needs.

This bifocal perspective enables mentors to guide new teachers in managing diverse classrooms while keeping a student-centred view, thus fostering a more inclusive approach to education.

Our previous research demonstrates the need for mentorship frameworks to explicitly adopt a more inclusive “ontological nurturing” (Taylor, 2021a, p. 769) that prioritises empathy and self-awareness. Experienced teachers often resist compliance with rigid standards, approaching mentoring from a holistic but not necessarily more inclusive position (Taylor, 2016). This distinction highlights the disconnect between imposed standards and teachers’ intrinsic values, underscoring the importance of surfacing the potential for bias in the interpretation of competency-against-standards if the dispositional awareness is not present. Drawing upon these insights, Attard Tonna et al. (2017) emphasise the importance of developmental and inquiry-oriented approaches in mentoring, which foster critical reflection among teachers. Their findings suggest that effective mentoring practices challenge traditional hierarchical relationships and instead prioritise collaboration and professional dialogue. This approach not only enhances teaching performance but also supports teacher growth across diverse educational contexts. Through a cross-case analysis, Attard Tonna et al. (2017) demonstrate the universality of reflective mentoring practices in fostering teacher development, providing evidence from multiple European countries. Together, these studies advocate for mentorship models that combine empathy, reflection, and professional dialogue to address biases and enhance teacher development globally.

Mentor Dispositions and the Role of Professional Standards

Mentor dispositional qualities such as empathy, adaptability, and cultural awareness are essential for fostering inclusive and effective mentorship. Although the Standards provide a structured approach for teacher evaluation, their heavy emphasis on technical skills over relational qualities limits their potential to support greater inclusion. There is a clear danger that mentors will support the teachers that look like them, rather than those who might bring a diverse or innovative approach that signals change. Taylor (2016) critiques the Standards compliance-oriented framework, highlighting that it often overlooks essential qualities such as passion, empathy, and relationality which many educators view as central to effective teaching. Teachers in Taylor’s (2016) study expressed frustration at the lack of recognition of these dispositional qualities, which they felt restricted their ability to engage inclusively with mentees. Thinking in particular about the Australian example, by failing to prioritise dispositional qualities, the Standards may inadvertently contribute to the very biases and institutional barriers they aim to dismantle.

Peeler and Jane (2005) and Viète and Peeler (2007) underscore how dispositionally-aware mentors can help mentees build confidence, empowering them to challenge restrictive norms and express their unique perspectives in professional spaces. Viète and Ha (2007) highlight that “respect requires that there be an understanding that the terms of communication and knowledge are heterogeneous, not one-sided ... This requires an acknowledgment of difference, but also, as we see it, a mutuality of attentiveness” (p. 44). Larsen et al. (2023) extend this argument, proposing a model of mentorship that values intellectual virtues and relational readiness, advocating for non-hierarchical learning partnerships that foster mutual growth. Nguyen (2019)

notes that dispositions like patience and open-mindedness are crucial for mentors to provide culturally responsive support that embraces mentees' unique cultural experiences rather than enforcing conformity to dominant norms. Furthermore, the research into the value of mentoring by teachers often notes the exchange of learning that can occur (Ambrosetti & Dekkers, 2010; Kuhn et al., 2022). These findings illustrate that mentorship models focusing on relational dynamics, emotional intelligence, and dispositional awareness can create a more inclusive, empowering, and supportive mentorship environment that enables an increasingly diverse teacher base which is essential for a sustainable, future focused profession.

Bias as a Barrier in Professional Formation

Without surfacing and exploring bias in mentorship, whether conscious or unconscious, it continues to serve as a significant barrier. Nigar, Kostogriz, Gurney, and Janfada (2024) described unconscious biases as gatekeeping mechanisms that subtly restrict access to career advancement and reinforce institutional preferences for dominant cultural perspectives. Taylor (2021b) argues that professional standards, while operating to regulate teacher practice, are nonetheless deeply seductive for the profession and difficult to counteract. The impact of mentors' attitudes on the mentoring relationship impacts aspiring teachers in terms of development, confidence, and retention. Where the dynamic is not based on emotional intelligence, self-awareness, and psychological safety, the mentor dyad is less likely to succeed (Bjørndal, 2020; Izadinia, 2015; Manderstedt et al., 2022).

Viete and Peeler (2007) argue that integrating cultural competence, self-reflection, and bias awareness into mentorship training is essential for addressing unconscious gatekeeping. This approach helps mentors ethically examine their biases and adopt inclusive practices that recognise and celebrate the unique experiences of teacher candidates and early career teachers. Larsen et al. (2023) support this call for policy reform, recommending mentorship standards that prioritise intellectual virtues and provide an inclusive environment where diversity is valued. Their proposed Future-focused Mentoring (FfM) model incorporates empathy, resilience, and intellectual virtues to create a culturally responsive mentorship environment. By encouraging mentors to engage in reflective practices and develop cultural competencies, this model aligns with transformative pedagogical approaches that emphasise the importance of recognising and valuing diversity in professional development (Yan, 2021). Recognising dispositions within professional standards can help bridge the gap between compliance and identity-driven teaching, promoting a mentorship culture that values relational qualities and diversity while incorporating the skills and knowledge requirements of the Standards.

Unconscious biases have a profound impact on mentorship experiences and career trajectories, especially for diverse teacher cohorts, (Cruickshank, 2022; Nigar, 2024; Peeler & Jane, 2005). The compliance-driven model of the Standards, with its focus on technical competencies, inadequately supports teacher candidates and early career teachers. Failure to take account of teachers' notions of the exemplary teacher—steeped in relational dispositions and in biases—risks diminishing rather than enriching professional identity (Taylor, 2021b). By contrast, frameworks that emphasise dispositional awareness, relational qualities, and cultural competence offer more adaptable, inclusive approaches to mentorship (Achinstein & Athanases,

2005; Larsen et al., 2023). Embedding bias awareness, cultural sensitivity, and disposition-focused mentoring into professional standards opens the possibility of a more equitable teaching environment, empowering diverse educators to realise their full potential.

Methods and Findings

This study, approved by the relevant ethics committee, employed a convergent parallel mixed methods research approach (Creswell, 2022) to investigate the complex interplay between mentor bias, teacher dispositions, and professional standards. Our research draws on data from a pilot Mentoring program offered to schools partnered with a university's Initial Teacher Education (ITE) program, with the aim of uncovering the subtle ways in which mentors may act as unconscious gatekeepers in the profession.

Participants and Data Collection

Participants were recruited from a cohort enrolled in a mentoring education program, with invitations extended via the program platform. The sample comprised 58 respondents to the survey and 10 focus group attendees. Mentor experience ranged from 1 to 30 years, providing a rich spectrum of perspectives that reflect the diversity of mentorship experiences within the teaching profession.

The online survey consisted of 25 questions using a 5-point Likert scale (from “not true at all” to “very true”) designed to probe mentors' beliefs about teaching and teacher dispositions. Qualitative data were gathered through open-ended survey responses and a focus group conducted via Zoom, allowing for deeper exploration of mentors' attitudes and experiences, particularly in relation to their unconscious biases and expectations of teacher candidates.

Data Analysis

We employed a multi-faceted analysis approach to capture the nuances in our data:

1. Quantitative data: Descriptive statistical analysis of Likert-scale responses.
2. Qualitative data: Thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2008) six-step process.

This rigorous approach allowed us to identify and explore the dissonance between mentors' stated beliefs and their unconscious biases, which is central to understanding the mechanisms of unconscious gatekeeping in teacher mentorship.

Key Findings

Our analysis revealed a striking contradiction in mentors' perspectives, which underscores the presence of unconscious biases that may influence mentor perceptions and judgements of competency and suitability for the profession. The quantitative data showed strong agreement with statements supporting a growth mindset and inclusivity in teaching:

- 93% of participants strongly agreed that you can improve your skills as a teacher
- 84% agreed that you can change your ability to teach
- 91% stated that it is somewhat to very true that no matter who you are, you can learn to teach well

These responses initially suggest a profession focused on improvement and operating from a growth mindset. However, these inclusive views contrasted sharply with beliefs about teacher dispositions:

- 98% of participants believed it is somewhat, fairly, or very true that teaching requires a special disposition
- 88% believed some people are not cut out to be teachers, with only 12% believing it to be not very true and zero marking their response as disagree

This contradiction reveals a fundamental tension between mentors' explicit beliefs about teaching as a learnable skill and their implicit assumptions about innate teacher qualities. This dissonance is at the heart of unconscious gatekeeping, as it may lead mentors to unconsciously favour teacher candidates who align with their preconceived notions of what makes a "real" teacher.

Thematic Analysis Results

The thematic coding of open-ended responses and focus group transcripts further illuminated this contradiction, revealing the subtle ways in which unconscious biases manifest in mentorship practices. Five core themes emerged from the open-ended survey questions:

1. Building professional relationships
2. Supporting growth and development
3. Guidance and sharing expertise
4. Fostering a growth mindset
5. Demonstrating emotional intelligence

While these themes suggest an understanding of the importance of supportive mentorship, the focus group discussions revealed a more complex picture. Deficit-oriented language emerged, indicating fixed mindsets and unconscious biases about teacher candidates' capabilities:

I see a big gap being in the ability to just handle and manage a whole classroom on their own.

But she tends to get really worked up and stressed about things.

And she sort of didn't really know how to like sort of talk to the children in a sense.

These comments reveal an expectation that teacher candidates should be pre-equipped with skills that typically develop through experience, reflecting a potential blind spot in mentors' understanding of the developmental nature of teaching proficiency. This disconnect between mentors' stated beliefs in growth and their unconscious expectations of immediate competence represents a significant barrier to inclusive mentorship.

The motivation to be a mentor often stemmed from personal experiences, as evidenced by this quote:

I've had some pretty awful mentors. When I started out in my teaching and I, it really got me to a point where I didn't even want to stay in the profession anymore.

However, this awareness of the impact of poor mentorship did not necessarily translate into a more inclusive approach to mentoring, highlighting the deeply ingrained nature of unconscious biases.

Implications for Unconscious Gatekeeping

The dissonance revealed in our findings illuminates the mechanisms of unconscious gatekeeping in teacher mentorship. While mentors explicitly endorse inclusive, growth-oriented views of teaching, their implicit biases about teacher dispositions and expectations of immediate competence may lead them to unconsciously favour certain types of teacher candidates over others. This gatekeeping effect could potentially exclude diverse voices and innovative approaches from the teaching profession, perpetuating existing norms and limiting the profession's ability to adapt to changing educational needs.

Furthermore, the lack of recognition among mentors of the broader challenges facing the teaching profession—such as teacher shortages, systemic pressures, and negative public perceptions—suggests a disconnect between mentorship practices and the evolving needs of the education system. This disconnect may further exacerbate the gatekeeping effect by failing to prepare new teachers for the realities of the profession.

Discussion

Addressing the unconscious bias in mentors thus emerges as a crucial aspect of mentor education. Not only is there a global impetus to recruit talented people into teaching, but there is also an imperative to broaden our understanding of what teaching is and what education is for, in order to reinvigorate the profession. The challenges to the profession from government, media, and those within it are calls to action for ITE providers and schools to interrogate the status quo. It is clear that the tripartite relationship between university, school, and teacher candidate can significantly contribute to successful completion and the transition of teacher candidates into the profession; equally, it has the power to disrupt these processes.

Mentoring education requires a framework which enables the surfacing and interrogation of bias awareness, cultural competence, and dispositional qualities within the profession. The Standards' compliance-driven approach—which emphasises technical skills—lacks these essential components, leading to mentorship practices that may inadvertently exclude new teachers who don't fit a traditional model. Reforming mentorship education to include disposition-aware content could transform the professional experiences of current and future teachers in Australia, fostering an inclusive environment that acknowledges diversity as a strength. Our suggested framework takes these ideas and, utilising a transformative pedagogical approach, centres the necessary self-focused work for mentors at the core of this development, enabling them to reflect and question their own professional identity as well as how they encounter others within the context of education.

Framework Development and Future Directions

Based on these findings, we developed a mentoring framework that integrates both epistemological and ontological domains, aiming to surface and challenge unconscious biases in mentorship. This framework seeks to bridge the gap between mentors' stated beliefs and their unconscious expectations, fostering more inclusive and effective mentorship practices.

Our findings highlight how the intersection of unconscious bias, the Standards, and mentors' dispositional expectations creates a complex dynamic in mentorship relationships. Mentors are asked to use the Standards as an explicit framework for assessment, but their sense of the importance of teacher dispositions operates as a shadow criterion in their judgement of teacher candidates' competence. This interaction is particularly evident in our data where mentors apparently paradoxically endorsed growth mindset principles while holding fixed views about innate teacher qualities. While the Standards govern teacher practice, they interact with mentors' deeply held beliefs about what makes a “real” teacher in ways that can reinforce rather than challenge existing biases. This complex interplay between formal assessment frameworks in which mentors are expected to participate and unconscious gatekeeping requires explicit attention in mentor education programs to prevent the perpetuation of exclusionary practices that may limit diversity in the profession.

Mentoring Framework

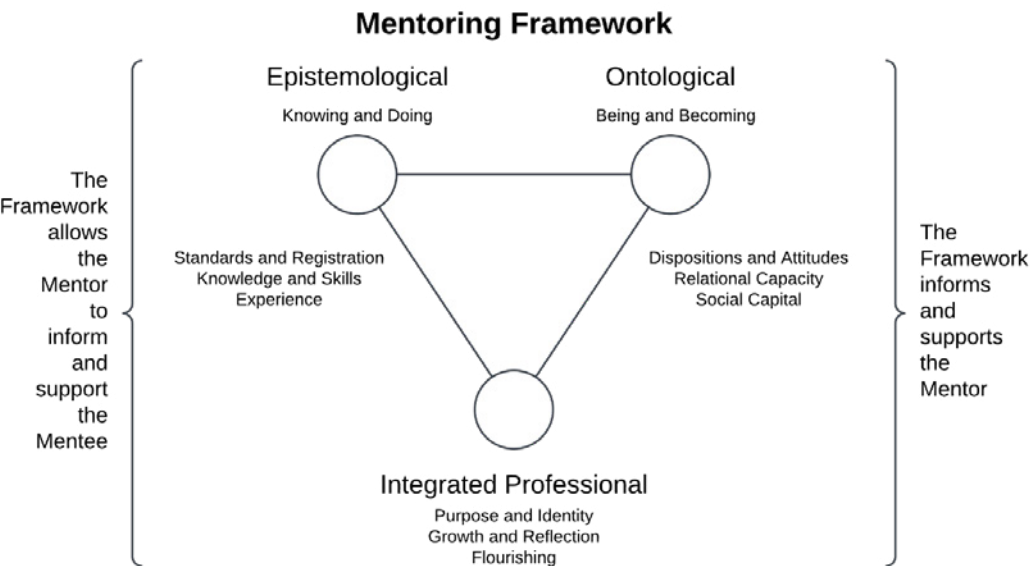
There is a need for a mentor education that looks to the future (Larsen et al., 2023) and challenges the transmissive model of “I do, you watch; you try, I correct; finally you do as I do” (Lammert et al., 2020, p. 3) that pervades the current offerings. Our pilot study data indicate contradictions in mentors' attitude towards teacher candidates and early career teachers' capacity expectations leading to an inability to meet the needs of current and future teachers. The unconscious bias that informs mentor teachers' dispositional expectations could have a significant impact on attraction and retention as it excludes those that don't “fit” a certain profile. A framework that includes an ontological dimension and which draws upon the requirements for ITE education and, in Australia, for registration, would provide focus and support for mentors and their continued development and integration as a professional. Supporting mentors to

challenge their own biases and connect their intentions to be supportive and inclusive with their actions opens the profession to diversity of thought and approach. In bringing together the epistemological and the ontological, we maintain the needed focus on mentors and the needs of the profession beyond the present.

In this mentoring framework (Figure 1), we challenge the unconscious bias that can lead to mentors informally communicating and formally assessing their mentees based on *how like them* the teacher candidate or early career teacher looks, behaves, thinks, and teaches. Whilst acknowledging the role of the Standards, we privilege the inclusion of the ontological dimension in order to interrogate the purpose and intention of education that must move beyond compliance and replication. In acknowledging the place of the self, our framework facilitates mentors’ challenging of their own unconscious bias, nurturing the creation of inclusive professional relationships built on trust and mutual growth.

Figure 1

Mentoring Framework



The framework is intended for use across different sectors and can be used as a point of reference for the auditing of current mentor education practices. It recognises the importance of teacher standards, whether in the form of the Australian Standards or in the ITE requirements for educators in other jurisdictions, that lead to a teacher qualification. These standards or requirements should be guides for the knowledge and skills needed for successful educators, and based on contemporary evidence-based understanding of how people learn. The epistemological

domain reminds mentors that teaching requires expertise that develops with experience. As we have shown, however, the inclusion of the ontological domain is essential. Recognising the role of this domain in mentoring holds three key aspects. Firstly, it acknowledges the importance of the relational nature of mentoring. Mentoring dyads require mutuality in terms of respect, trust, and empathy in order for growth to occur. Secondly, it challenges the assumption that mentors are naturally able to build effective, inclusive, and psychological safe relationships with all mentees. Finally, it opens a discourse on education from its current state to a potential future state, enabling mentors to reflect on the purpose of education and needs of the profession beyond their own epistemological and ontological identity.

The combination of epistemological and ontological domain in mentor education informs and supports both mentee and mentor in their work together, their individual growth, and the needs of the profession through an integrated lens. The intended outcome of an integrated professional, we believe, has the potential to impact the current completion and retention numbers through improving conditions that lead to flourishing.

Conclusion

The exclusive focus on the Standards leads to the understanding of mentoring as a relationship between two people being sidelined. As a result, this relationship remains in the shadows for both mentor and mentee, present but unexamined. In this space, there is the potential for the mentor to remain unaware of their own unconscious bias and attitudes towards what they perceive to be suitable teacher candidates, seeking to find recognisable dispositions in the other. Unconscious bias can lead to the replication of the profession rather than a profession that reflects the society it teaches and the future it expects.

Commitment to understand one's professional identity enables an intentional exploration designed to surface the values and beliefs that underpin one's disposition towards teaching from a personal and a professional position. Through the addition of the ontological domain in mentor education, there is the opportunity to challenge biases and create a more intentionally inclusive relationship.

Our study underscores the urgent need for mentor education that explicitly addresses unconscious biases and their impact on mentorship practices. By bringing these biases to light and providing tools for self-reflection and inclusive mentoring, we aim to reshape mentorship practices to foster a more diverse and adaptable teaching profession.

Until there is an acknowledgement that the mentor teacher is an integral part of the teacher candidate's preparation, and suitable resourcing allowed for their development as an integrated professional, unconscious gatekeeping will persist. Validating and refining this framework, as well as exploring its potential impact on teacher retention, professional confidence, and diversity in the teaching profession, are the next stages for research. Future research should investigate the long-term effects of inclusive mentorship on teacher retention, professional confidence, and diversity, providing valuable insights into fostering equity and innovation in the teaching profession. By addressing the mechanisms of unconscious gatekeeping, we can work

towards a more equitable and innovative educational landscape that better serves the needs of all students and educators.

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Can Middle School Leaders Support Instruction in a Multifaceted Crisis—Is “Support” Comprehensive Enough?

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*ABSTRACT: In this article, we describe how middle school leadership can support instruction during a crisis and at any time. Administrators must help teachers and students navigate such calamities as mandated emergency remote teaching, pandemics, and violence, as well as manage consequences (learning loss, rising disparities, nonmentored colleagues, etc.). When called upon (or forced) to rethink educational delivery, operations, or policies, leaders must create a return-to-school plan. Testimonial data for this reflective work came from the responses of middle school practitioners to our study at four presentations we gave at three conferences in 2023. Using our transcriptions, we narrate themes associated with attendees’ verbal feedback that bear on instruction as well as the role of administration. An applicable original mentoring model contextualises this discussion and enables critique to be advanced around the question of whether “support” is comprehensive enough for supporting instruction in a multifaceted crisis. Relevant literature and implications for leadership are included. This writing connects to/advances our empirical study published in *Research in Middle Level Education Online* by offering reflection on teacher experiences and views of emergency remote teaching and school leadership.*

Key words: Emergency remote teaching, instruction, mentoring model, middle school leadership, teacher mentoring, teacher perspective

Research and Policy Context

How might middle school administrators support instruction in crisis contexts? To consider this research question, we examined challenges of rurality, impactful principalship action, methods, themes from middle schools, and implications for leaders. The broad rationale for this article is that attention is needed on how leaders’ practices affect instruction and improve systems in the (post)-COVID era, including mentoring support structures for teachers.

To set the stage, the middle school practitioners (teachers and administrators) at our conference sessions were mostly working in rural schools. Our own research is situated in Appalachian rural settings (e.g., Cox & Mullen, 2023; Mullen & Badger, 2023; Mullen & Fleming, 2024), and it responds to the national policy context, particularly the National Rural Education Association’s (2022) 2022–2027 agenda to strengthen rural communities and address inequities through principals’ decision making. Further, the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) requires that Title I practices be evidence based and foster student outcomes (higher-order thinking skills, etc.) through equitable learning opportunities (Cox & Mullen, 2023).

We are a tenured educational leadership professor and a secondary school principal in Virginia, USA. Our research collaboration resulted in a middle school study of pandemic instruction from the teacher perspective (Mullen & Badger, 2023). As investigators of rural school leadership, we wish to raise awareness of how leaders equip teachers to provide a quality education. Spurring our inquiry was mutual interest in middle school teachers’ perceptions of administrative support when forced to pivot to online instruction during the pandemic.

This writing connects to/advances the study we published in *Research in Middle Level Education Online* (Mullen & Badger, 2023) by offering reflection on teacher experiences and views of emergency remote teaching (ERT) and school leadership. Data for the current writing were more currently derived from feedback at our presentations in 2023 where attendees responded to our published study. For our conference tour, we felt compelled to find out what middle school teachers think about online modalities of learning, given the advantage of seeing ERT in hindsight. We wondered if they might have ideas about how building leaders can help teachers and students to flourish and communities to thrive, although much of what they said in this regard was implicit.

Challenges of Rurality

Systemic inequities and inadequacies are a “wicked problem” of rural education (Corbett & Tinkham, 2015). Rural schools can be burdened with poverty and limited educational opportunities and equity (Azano & Stewart, 2015; Mullen & Fleming, 2024). In non-metro areas (*rurality* in its most rudimentary sense; Bennett et al., 2019), rural students often have fewer educational opportunities and resources (than their urban counterparts). They tend to have less access to school counsellors, medical assistance, broadband internet, and school transportation living in communities contending with high unemployment and mental health crises (opioid use, etc.) (Azano & Stewart, 2015; Cox & Mullen, 2023). Principals and teachers must navigate such pressing problems and work with families to improve outcomes. Thus, they utilise place-based

assets (e.g., family–community engagement) or “social capital” for supporting school and student outcomes (Preston & Barnes, 2017). They also manage dire challenges through such means as developing relationships among teachers and other stakeholders, generating and/or implementing policy, and prioritising instructional leadership (Badger et al., 2023; Cox & Mullen, 2023).

Moreover, activist leaders are change agents. Rural principals improve their schools by disrupting patterns of underachievement for low-income and minoritised student populations as well as by addressing workplace challenges and opportunities (Hesbol et al., 2020; Preston & Barnes, 2017). Implementing effective instructional leadership practices with teachers, they “build trusting relationships, nurture an environment of high expectations, collaborate professionally, develop teacher collective efficacy and social trust, and monitor data effectively to drive instruction” (Cox & Mullen 2023, pp. 8–9; also Leithwood, 2021). While such leadership actions are not unique to the rural education setting, they are intensified given societal complexities.

To keep pace with national policy expectations and agendas in a crisis context, leaders at the middle level must find ways to strengthen their school community and tackle inequities, among other perennial problems. Principals need to reimagine how to thrive while meeting diverse and complex needs. Pressures and barriers are especially apparent in schools with high needs, and at the middle level serving young adolescents (Eisenbach et al., 2020). Ladson-Billings’s (2021) hard reset metaphor calls upon educators to creatively disrupt systemic inequities in preK–12 education. This work centres on the important role of leadership.

Change agents understand the barriers that might impact students’ access to opportunity, especially for those from low socioeconomic status (SES) households. With good intention, they move the needle by prioritising student progress, success, and well-being. As morally commendable actors, they ensure the quality of curriculum and instruction delivered to the student body. Overseeing equity in opportunities and resources, they attend to academic and other supports (advising, tutoring, etc.) that address learners’ individual needs. Being attuned to the local context requires that principals effectively navigate place-based challenges, utilise assets, and implement evidence-based practices (Cox & Mullen, 2023; Mullen & Badger, 2023; Preston & Barnes, 2017).

As documented in our initial explorations of rural leadership, leaders’ perspectives and practices are relevant. In the rural Appalachian schools we examined, pandemic leaders managed to navigate and influence online instruction, educational opportunities, and outcomes for students and teachers (Cox & Mullen, 2023; Mullen & Badger, 2023). Specifically, Cox and Mullen (2023) drew attention to the most influential moves of two rural principals in Title I Virginia schools. One such leadership action centred on support systems/supports: data meetings, data monitoring to drive instruction, collaborative lesson planning, and informal observations of classrooms with feedback or coaching. Also, faculties’ lessons were aligned with state standards—not as an isolated teacher practice but rather a collective endeavour involving school leaders and grade-level teams. Other noteworthy administrative moves targeted community partnerships, relationship building, resource distribution, visibility and transparency, and teacher professional development and learning (PDL) for curriculum in online and blended settings.

However, critical equity and sustainability challenges have captured the nation. Teacher shortages, especially educators of colour; teacher/leader turnover; reduction in teacher diversity; teacher absenteeism; and decreased job satisfaction perpetuate trials for leaders (Castro, 2023; Hesbol et al., 2020; Mullen & Fleming, 2024). With the shortages, education systems suffer, adversely affecting organisational culture, educational equity, and ultimately student outcomes.

Highly qualified, exemplary principals and teachers are key to student success, especially for underserved groups and those living in poverty (Parrett & Bridges, 2020). While it is unclear exactly how principals' actions and decisions influence learning outcomes, instructional practices, such as collaborative data planning sessions, have been identified, along with resources (internal and external) that mitigate barriers to student productivity and well-being (e.g., Cox & Mullen, 2023).

One such instructional practice is new teacher mentoring/induction in rural school settings wherein principals have interpreted as well as operationalised programming in their schools. In participating middle schools in Appalachian Virginia (elementary and high schools also engaged in interviews), one principal described mentoring as a socialisation process that shapes new teachers into what they should be or become to the extent possible in an ethos of staffing shortages and resource constraints. School-based mentoring practices at the site included instructionally oriented meetings and a formal new teacher program, offering structured mentoring to novices who were paired with a veteran teacher. These mentorships are quite typical in their focus, which is successful classroom teaching in addition to becoming a good citizen in the building and profession. Vigilance is practiced by this principal to ensure that mentors perform well and are competent in the mentoring role, with decisions made annually as to which mentor teachers would receive mentoring assignments the next year. In his mind, the mentors had to be helping novice teachers in ways that directly benefited students and their learning outcomes to continue in this role. The principal's judgement depended not on quantitative evidence but rather anecdotal reports indicating that novices were growing as teachers relative to benchmarks for annual goals. Student discipline, important in the middle environment, was another indicator of mentoring effectiveness (Mullen & Fleming, 2024).

Under-resourced schools—like those in “distressed” areas of Appalachia (Appalachian Regional Commission, 2021)—reflect characteristics of the area. SES and educational opportunity for rural students are impacted by geographic isolation, measured by the distance from urban centres (Drescher & Torrance, 2022). Other commonalities are lack of instructional materials (Mojapelo, 2019), limited technological infrastructure (Vale & Graven, 2021), staffing challenges (Castro, 2023), a depleted pool of veteran teachers to serve as qualified mentors for new hires (Mullen & Fleming, 2024), and inequitable education (Lavalley, 2018). Resources affect leaders' ability to respond to crises and well-being (Vale & Graven, 2021).

In one study, mentoring was occurring within the elementary and middle schools, albeit unevenly, and to a far lesser extent in the high schools. Researchers Mullen and Fleming (2024) had interviewed leaders in 17 schools to explore creative responses to leadership challenges and constraints in rural Virginia. As discovered, principals' capacity as instructional leaders and equity advocates on behalf of youth took precedence over the mentoring of new teachers. Prioritising learner needs and the schools' glaring inequities, namely high numbers of students

with disabilities and chronically absent populations, did not seem to address the reality that teacher novices must be successfully mentored and assisted in ways that help them adjust to a new work culture and classroom teaching. Equitable workloads for new teachers and mentors was not a consideration of these leaders and, quite likely, may have seemed impossible in school divisions overtaken by recruitment and retention problems and consumed with student needs.

Online Learning and ERT

Here, we clarify the idea of ERT and situate our study in recent literature on middle level education and ERT. ERT is distinct from online instruction. Online instruction refers to the academic learning of skills and knowledge via the internet for which the exchange does not depend on being physically present with the instructor (Mullen & Badger, 2023). Distance education has existed since the early 1960s in the U.S., yet uncertainties about its effectiveness continue (Fulmer & Turner, 2013; Huss, 2007; McFarlane, 2011; Rakes & Dunn, 2015).

ERT, however, involves unforeseen instruction in online learning contexts during a global emergency (Eisenbach et al., 2020). Bishop (2021) used ERT to characterise this sudden shift in teaching that was evidenced for 192 countries in 2020. Literature on middle level virtual education during ERT includes research by Bishop (2021), Crosby et al. (2020), Eisenbach et al. (2020), Haverback (2020), Middleton (2020), Mullen and Badger (2023), Rheaume (2022), and Salerni (2021). Additional studies of remote instruction in K–12 or secondary environments are also available (e.g., Cutri et al., 2020; Dolighan & Owen, 2021; Han & Patterson, 2020; Masry-Herzallah & Stavisky, 2021).

When COVID-19 struck, U.S. teachers had to prepare their in-person lessons and activities in computer-based formats for learning remotely while attending to student and parent needs (Bishop, 2021; Dolighan & Owen, 2021; Mullen & Badger, 2023). Teachers' own trauma and needs involved personal struggle, which intensified workload difficulties compounded by limited assistance, mentoring, resources, time, experience, and knowledge. According to Crosby et al. (2020), "collective trauma" from the pandemic affected teacher well-being. While this new online environment aggravated learning deficits and student disparities across educational levels (Vawter & McMurtrie, 2022), schools had struggled with remote delivery of instruction, weighing its potential costs, long before the crisis. For example, in 2007, 75 middle level principals thought that teaching's "social aspects" (human contact, in-person interaction, etc.) might be compromised in online learning settings (Huss, 2007).

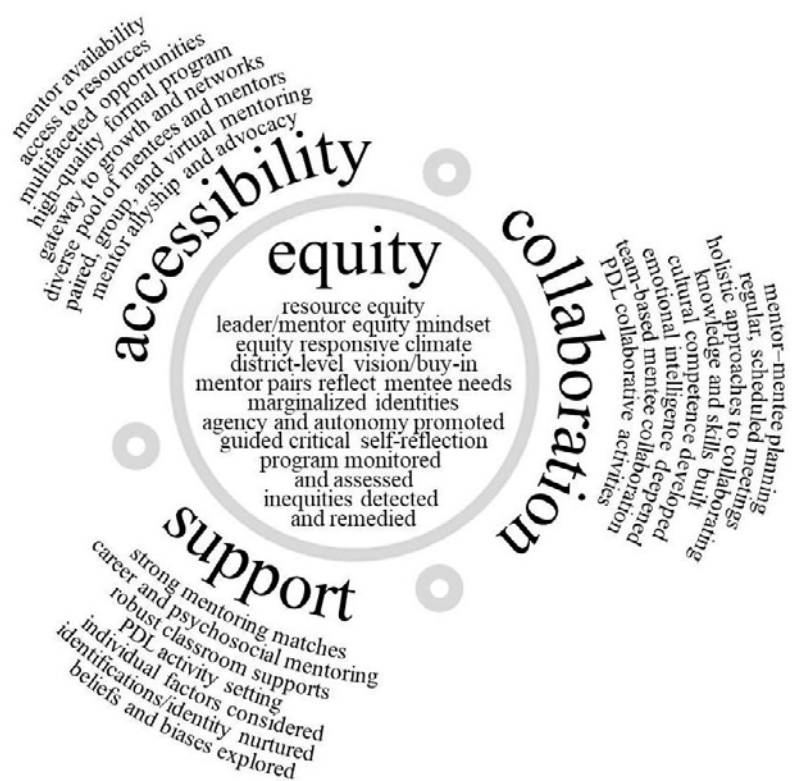
What More is There Than "Support"?

The central question of this article concerns whether "support" is comprehensive enough for supporting instruction in a multifaceted crisis. To this end, an applicable original mentoring model contextualises this discussion and enables critique to be advanced around this question. Indeed, Mullen (2025), the lead author, has proposed that support is *not* enough for supporting quality instruction in K–12 learning environments. By analysing research on mentoring and

conducting school-based field studies over the years, she arrived at the insight that more is needed than support. Thus, her new teacher mentoring framework features four key components: Support, Accessibility, Collaboration and Equity (SACE).

Figure 1

SACE With Associated Research Descriptors



Note. From *Equity in School Mentoring and Induction* by C. A. Mullen, 2025, p. 39. Copyright 2025 by Springer.

This aspirational framework can be used to help principals and other leaders, including educational leadership faculty, imagine support as an interconnected system for promoting new teacher effectiveness in academic and professional contexts. It presents a blueprint for more effectively and intentionally integrating support into comprehensive mentoring/induction practices. This framework is conducive for program, leadership, and relational development, and for policymaking in school settings. A goal is to re-imagine mentoring using SACE as metric to gauge equity and, hence, the overall effectiveness and health of institutional cultures. When equity forms a key component in a well-supported mentoring initiative, manifold benefits can

occur: enhanced morale, improved performance, a sense of accomplishment, meaningful engagement, positive relationships, and increased productivity (Mullen, 2025; Mullen & Fleming, 2024).

For this article, we continued to pursue the question initially posed (see Mullen & Badger, 2023) of whether teachers had experienced their administrators as supportive of their instruction in the pandemic. We recognised that support is but one “part” of the SACE “equation” for leading effectively and equitably in a multifaceted crisis. It turned out that most teachers had felt supported to do their jobs, citing examples of administrators who worked alongside and listened to them while helping with tasks, including parent contact and the digital overload.

Effective principal decisions are evidenced by observable behaviours and actions (Grissom et al., 2021) that cultivate student progress (Leithwood, 2021). As confirmed by Hesbol et al. (2020), school leadership is most impactful in underperforming rural sites where the need for direction is the greatest. The Cox and Mullen (2023) study that examined principals’ impact on student learning in rural, high-poverty schools found that their decisions and actions as instructional leaders can have a direct influence on outcomes.

Methods

In 2023, 34 practitioners and academics attended our research sessions on pandemic schooling specific to ERT at the middle level (Mullen & Badger, 2023). The three conferences were Association for Middle Level Education ([AMLE]; Badger et al., 2023), International e-Conference on Management of Educational Units, and University Council for Educational Administration ([UCEA]; Badger & Mullen, 2023; Mullen et al., 2023). Attendees were 27 middle school practitioners from across the United States: 23 from rural settings, 3 urban, and 1 suburban. We typed notes (without people’s names or other identifiers) as attendees reacted to the content and findings of our research. After independently analysing the complete set of testimonial comments (conference data source), we compared the results. Using our transcriptions, we prepared a summary for the thematic section. Our four conference proposals were also utilised in this writing, with new literature.

Our original interview study (Mullen & Badger, 2023) was methodologically encumbered. Besides the paucity of literature on our topic, systemic restriction on data collection was a pandemic-induced barrier. We ended up with access to only one middle school (grades 6–8) in rural Virginia, where schooling was chaotic and instruction solely virtual. Fifteen teachers experiencing ERT completed our demographics survey, but only six could make time for an interview.

Next, we present themes that intersected our conference sessions, focusing on middle-level practitioners at AMLE and UCEA, and, where available, they are quoted.

Themes From the Middle

Conference attendees thought that research and materials in general on remote instruction at the middle level were sparse. Inequities and inadequacies for teachers, students, and leaders was a further observation. They mentioned continuing problems with accessing both electronic devices and the internet for children and adults alike. During the pandemic, they also struggled with converting their curriculum and lessons to digital forms. Not wanting to return to compulsory online teaching was a point of emphasis: “Just thinking about virtual instruction stresses me out.”

However, as noted by the 12 attending UCEA teachers, their administrators helped them navigate the schooling crisis. Not only did they receive assistance with digitally adapting their curricular materials, but they also had help with learners who struggled with the adjustment to remote learning and remaining connected and engaged with the content. But the learning management systems were difficult for them to learn and manage as classroom teachers. While seven were using Canvas’s visual suite for the first time, four stuck with Google Classroom (just as they did in the physical school setting), and one relied on Microsoft Teams.

As told by them, U.S. states had different return-to-school plans, with mention specifically of California, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, South Dakota, and Virginia. State governors had left crucial decision-making to local school boards. The teachers said that all states’ school divisions shut down on March 20, 2020, and that for 2 weeks teaching staff were asking when they would be returning to their schools, what instructional delivery mode(s) they could expect to be using (in-person, blended, or fully online), and for how many days weekly would they need to be physically there. Seven (of the eight) attendees returned August 2020 to a hybrid classroom setting: essentially two groups of students 4 days a week, with the other designated a teacher workday. In South Dakota, the teachers returned to an in-person classroom with the option of virtually instructing them. In this state’s middle schools, only 7% of the 1,200 returning students chose online learning (over the physical classroom). In March 2021, six (of the eight) teachers resumed teaching 5 days a week and in person, with the option of remaining virtual in their classroom delivery. In August 2021, all eight of our attendees were back teaching in-person, again with the option of virtual learning for the students. Five taught in-person and virtually, whereas the other three were required to teach online.

As disclosed at the AMLE conference, five teachers in eight U.S. states had the choice to physically return when schools reopened but needed a medical note if they preferred to work from home. Some were forced to go to campus but stayed isolated, practicing social distancing. They added that teachers who quit their job could not afford being exposed to the coronavirus.

In the combined UCEA sessions, we again heard from most (21/22) attendees that their building administrators had supported teachers. For example, they helped with parent contacts and, like the UCEA attendees, digitising lessons: “My administrator used Google Classroom more than me, so she was a tremendous help with converting my lessons digitally.” All concluded that attendance was poor in their online classes, largely attributing this problem to students not being mandated to be present. Nineteen shared that too many students lacked

parental guidance at home so were not held accountable for signing into the classroom, participating and communicating with their teacher, and completing/submitting assignments.

All agreed that pandemic teachers were “working 24/7” and supporting their students while caring for their own families, thus their health suffered. Eight (of 22) testimonials also conveyed that relationships had suffered—some broken still. A teacher from California observed that the crisis put a huge strain on teacher–parent relations, adding that relationships have not fully healed. Some parents were invested, while others never communicated, implying that parental communication was “all or nothing.”

Teacher disengagement in the online environment and disenchantment with teaching at a distance were other obstacles. An educator in our session overheard her child’s teacher exclaim to the class: “It doesn’t work for me to teach anymore—I’ll be on this Zoom link once or twice a week if you have questions.” Another worrying incident was relayed: “A math teacher told their students that they couldn’t teach today and was staying in bed so if they needed help to just ask.”

To all these teachers, online modalities were previously merely a convenience for when schools close due to weather, a crisis, or another event. But the ripple effects from the period of damaging disruption are paramount. Twenty (of 22) reported that middle-level educators are retiring or switching careers due to the protracted negative impacts of COVID. Extreme demands have been placed on faculties to figure out how to compensate for students’ learning losses, lower cognitive skills, and missed socialisation, which depletes the potential for peer learning.

Two middle school teachers said that our study findings validated their experiences and perceptions. In the UCEA session, a South Carolina teacher shared, “I really appreciate and affirm your findings. I’m a middle school teacher—what you discovered is exactly what I experienced. My administrators listened and helped with tasks—they were open and honest with communication.” A Virginia teacher added that had it not been for her administrators being so supportive during the pandemic, she did not believe that she would last. Both teachers revealed the same concern: “Students rarely attended my virtual classes and did not complete or submit assignments. When they did attend, their engagement was very low.”

Conference audience members seemed to mainly view administrators’ pandemic behaviours in a positive light. But there were problems associated with leadership performance around core responsibilities. Based on what attendees had themselves witnessed or heard, they alluded to dysfunctionalities in the working environment, missed learning in a noncompulsory, remotely delivered instructional program, and lack of school-wide motivation for achieving common goals. As strongly recommended, attendance in online classes must be mandated and enforced by the administration, which in turn enables teachers to engage their pupils, and pupils to learn and achieve. Paradoxically, while building leaders made the difference to teacher survival and performance, in the crucial area of instruction it seems they could have done more.

Implications for Leaders

During our conference tour, middle school educators listened to our 2023 study of ERT in a pandemic (Mullen & Badger, 2023) and responded. Their testimonies revealed pedagogical and cultural challenges and hinted at the toll of collective trauma on school communities and the

profession. They suggested ways for administrators to (better) support curriculum and instruction, such as directly communicating with parents, overseeing school policy, and helping teachers and students navigate calamities. When asked to rethink educational delivery, operations, or policies, leaders must create a return-to-school plan (a hard reset). They need to be prepared for learning losses, rising disparities, nonmentored teachers and students, broken relationships, heightened anxiety, and even student violence.

A policy ethos sets the tone for the performance expectations of adolescents as well as educators. District or school policy requiring attendance in online classes mirrors physical classroom norms. Leadership role modelling around professional attitudes and behaviours involves monitoring disruptions to the learning environment and ensuring an active teaching presence on the part of staff. Remotely delivered education that is imposed is undesirable, especially without teacher training and preparedness. Nonetheless, students should not encounter adults who refuse to teach online, abandoning their classes. Such (in)actions may be symptomatic of teacher frustration, disengagement, and burnout. Conference attendees expressed angst and worry about returning to a fully online instructional program—particularly with no end in sight.

To repeat leadership solutions/strategies, administrators will want to implement policies and practices governing student attendance and teacher work in online environments. Other strategies are infusing technological support structures; ensuring administrator role modelling, monitoring, assistance, and engagement; enculturating authentic collaboration or cooperation; offering targeted PDL; and, importantly, providing structured mentoring/induction programs. In schools, these range from areas of improvement to interventions or even place-based assets cultivated for impact and sustainability. Leaders who listen to teachers from an equity perspective are investing in a crucial asset—employee dedication to quality instruction and learning outcomes for every student. Listening to teachers is a basic expectation for heightening opportunities that allow for effectively and equitably mentoring professionals so that they will stay in the profession. Models are needed for guiding a more comprehensive vision of support.

Limitations and Delimitations

This offshoot study had three limitations:

- (a) The research on K–12 virtual instruction is scarce and generally focuses on blended instruction, limiting information about the transition from in-person to virtual instruction within a climate of administrative support;
- (b) The data were very modest due to the reliance on conference attendees and their responses; and
- (c) Although mentioned and evident in some of our citations (e.g., Huss, 2007; Rheame, 2022), we did not explore young adolescence and development. A delimitation was that participants had to be middle-level practitioners subjected to ERT in a school which satisfied eligibility criteria.

Future Directions

Further research is warranted to better understand how middle school leaders create an environment that supports instruction in difficult times. Not all middle level principals may be convinced that remote learning in the best of times can effectively and equitably serve their student populations. Future middle level teachers need to understand adolescents and be prepared to fully engage them, given the importance of live interaction in safe, stimulating environments and students' complex developmental needs (Eisenbach et al., 2020; Huss, 2007). Thus, it is important that studies systemically track principals' perceptions, assuming that online teacher and leader preparation have become a feature of preparation programs (Huss, 2007). In the post-pandemic era, we see a need for discerning teacher views in blended, online, and in-person middle level contexts, with emphasis on leadership support of teaching and learning, including employee mentoring.

This study contributes to research on teacher perceptions of middle-level leadership support for mandated ERT in a crisis. We suggest that future investigations along these lines incorporate diverse pools of teachers from a variety of middle level schools and analyse how administration assists them with access and equity in the online classroom and on behalf of underserved populations. Research on student and parental perception could also help teachers and leaders better attune to stakeholders and their influence. Our findings can be studied at a deeper level or examined in different remote learning contexts, such as urban middle level environments, to discern the impact of leadership support on teacher beliefs relative to online instruction in areas like faculty readiness.

Many faculty may feel overwhelmed teaching remotely, especially in crisis situations, but persist, overcoming hardship. Interestingly, in another COVID study (Bishop, 2021), some middle level faculty reported gains in their teaching practice when prompted to identify at least one improvement during 2020. Based on survey data from 332 remote instructors in New England, overall pluses involved knowledge and skill development, with attention on expanded ways of personalising learning and engaging families. We encourage teachers to experiment with online learning modalities and attract support from leaders for their readiness and effectiveness, and we urge leaders to work as a team and create cultures conducive to teacher self-efficacy, proficiencies, collaboration, and achievement.

Conclusion

With the research reported, we speak to leadership in a time of globalised trauma and from the middle level teacher perspective in an ERT-influenced context. An unknown is whether middle level schools, and educational institutions in general, may be subjected to another time when classrooms are forced online at a moment's notice. But it makes sense to prepare leaders who can lead in times of conflict and humanitarian emergencies, such as war and natural disasters, understanding that this notion is "somewhat flawed" without the time to prepare (Haverback, 2020). A takeaway from virtual learning in the middle level pandemic world focuses more on people than technology, specifically how to support and empower teachers (Eisenbach

et al., 2020). Our study, an offshoot of published research (Mullen & Badger, 2023), serves as a springboard for such challenging work and builds on the extant literature, but with a leadership lens.

As we continue to face multiple crises and live with global trauma, education leaders will probably be even more crucial to teachers’ capacity to endure. How principals and other administrators can more fully support their faculties and in impactful ways is an important area of attention for school communities, researchers, and policymakers. The pandemic has cast a “long shadow” (Kapila, 2023), despite reassurances that it is over. Middle-level practitioners are not convinced that remote learning in the best of times can effectively and equitably serve adolescents. Challenged with engaging youth whose developmental needs are complex, these adults understand the value of live interaction in safe, stimulating environments (Eisenbach et al., 2020), and that teachers must be empowered to do the best job possible. The importance of discerning adult views of teaching in middle-level contexts cannot be exaggerated, including readiness for remote instruction. Leadership commitment to the teaching enterprise and reducing educational disparity for adolescents is critical at all times.

Problems continue to magnify in virtual/blended delivery settings compounded by global, national, and local crises. In the learning revolution sparked by COVID, leaders’ influence magnifies. Focusing on healthy schools—mentored teacher novices and students, well-being, school safety, and so forth—is essential. Making equitable decisions, creating collaborative cultures, behaving in constructive ways, sponsoring high-quality PDL, implementing equitable mentoring/induction programs, and enforcing school policy are expected of leaders (Mullen, 2025; Mullen & Fleming, 2024). Teachers rely on leaders’ benevolent actions and compassionate support, and wisdom cannot be overrated. Currently, leaders in different school and district settings around the world are likely seeking to protect jobs in crisis contexts and, importantly, the well-being of students and teachers.

On a final note, anyone is welcome to use the research-informed SACE framework as a leadership compass for creating, reviewing, and strengthening mentoring/induction initiatives within a rapidly changing field of education. While middle school leaders’ support of instruction in a multifaceted crisis is essential, support is, we contend, not comprehensive enough. Not only support but also accessibility, collaboration, and equity are needed for imaginatively and strategically fostering new teacher mentoring, which in turn make support more impactful. Consistent with this picture, well-being also matters. This concept can be thought of as embedded in SACE or a fifth significant component. Feeling accepted and supported, having access to rewarding opportunities, and being treated fairly are key aspects of well-being (Mullen, 2025).

Authors’ Note

Our original study (Mullen & Badger, 2023) was approved by the university’s Institutional Review Board (July 2021, IRB #21-441).

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Carol Mullen is an internationally acclaimed professor and researcher based at Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, Virginia. She is author of over 230 journal articles and book chapters and 29 books, six of which are focused on mentoring. She co-authored the *SAGE handbook of mentoring and coaching* back in 2012 which remains a seminal resource covering theory and practice of mentoring and coaching. Moreover, Carol Mullen is the former editor of the Routledge Journal, *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*. She is very well-qualified to write another book on mentoring.

Equity in school mentoring and induction takes a very refreshing and innovative look at mentoring and induction in schools. As indicated by the title, it re-imagines mentoring and induction by paying close attention to equity/social justice as a key component. Unlike other books on mentoring that often combine it with coaching, this book brings mentoring and induction together where they are both described as “formal initiatives that are planned and structured” (p. 6) by schools and/or systems to support novice teachers in their first three years of teaching. While mentoring programs often sit within induction programs for newcomers, the two programs are not usually spoken about in the same breath since induction programs can and do exist independently of formal mentoring programs.

An important contribution of this book is that it puts forward a new model of mentoring, one that builds upon Mullen’s earlier model (SAC – support, accessibility, collaboration) to incorporate an equity dimension: SACE (support, accessibility, collaboration, equity). Mullen’s thesis is that “equity – the heartbeat of mentoring and induction – centers comprehensive, justice-oriented mentoring in equitable and effective practices that reflect integrity, consistency, and fidelity” (p. 88). She argues that supporting a novice’s learning and development both equitably and effectively is beneficial not only for the novice and the school but also as a means of addressing (at least in part) a profession characterised by teacher shortages and teacher attrition.

Mullen’s book is divided into five main chapters. The introduction sets the scene for the book, and spells out its significance, purpose, problem context, and intended audience. Chapter 2 reviews the mentoring and induction literature by exploring three main areas: key concepts in teacher contexts; mentoring and induction frameworks; and school trends found within the literature. An important trend in the literature Mullen points to is the critical role principals play in creating and sustaining strong mentoring cultures in their schools through their commitment to equitable support, access, and collaboration. Chapter 3 introduces the SACE framework and makes an argument for the inclusion of “equity” for its ability to enhance novice teachers’

(including novice teachers of colour) job satisfaction, well-being, retention, and better outcomes for diverse learners. Mullen asks:

How might support, considered from an equity lens, influence leaders to look afresh at structures, opportunities, and resources to support every novice more fully? ... What might accessibility look like when new teachers and staff are assured of equitable access to high-quality, available mentors and mentoring processes? ... How might collaboration benefit from approaches that prioritize collaborative mentoring infused with principles of fairness, inclusivity, and justice? (p. 27)

By far the most interesting chapter for me was Chapter 4 that provided three case studies of school-based new teacher mentoring programs from poor urban, suburban, and rural settings across the United States. All three cases had been developed by Mullen and colleagues and published/presented previously. For each of the cases, the SACE framework was applied. While the first case described a superintendent’s plan to introduce an urban online systemwide mentoring initiative to support all new teachers in his district, the second reported on research with three elementary schools within one suburban district to understand the experience of the program from the perspectives of mentor teachers, new teachers, and principals. The third case involved 10 schools in a single rural division to gain an understanding about support for newcomer mentoring and equity. This third case reinforced the point that mentoring/induction programs don’t exist in a vacuum but are impacted upon by the wider school climate and context. As Mullen argued:

The effective mentoring of novices was considered important [by school-based personnel], yet the heavy workloads did not seem to protect newcomers. State testing, rural poverty, chronic absenteeism, and negative family influences were barriers they inherited. (p. 77)

There is no doubt that mentoring newcomers in high poverty schools is challenging due to a range of external forces. While the vast mentoring literature tells us that the quality of the relationship between mentor and newcomer is the critical ingredient for the success of mentoring, it rarely acknowledges the forceful impact that systemic inequities can have on the outcomes of mentoring programs. Mullen’s third case study does a fine job of making this point.

A useful addition to each of the chapters (except for Chapter 1) is a section entitled, “Conversation starters and reflective activities” that provides stimulus for further thinking about the chapter’s content, and suggestions for conversations to take the ideas further. These reflective activities could be used by school and district personnel interested in establishing mentoring programs as well as providing stimulus for schools/systems that have current programs in operation. Both school- and system-based practitioners and faculty within higher education programs are likely to find the content within Mullen’s book both relevant and accessible. In summary, *Equity in school mentoring and induction* is an interesting and practical book that both broadens and enriches our thinking about the importance of designing and implementing equitable mentoring and induction programs. It has my recommendation.

Comprehensive History of ACEL

Written by Dr Marie Jansen (FACEL)

https://www.ancel.org.au/ACELWEB/About/Comprehensive_History_of_ACEL.aspx

How It All Started: The History of ACEL

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

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

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

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

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

One observer noted:

In the initial discussions it was evident that there were misgivings as to the viability of such an organisation. The clouds of doubt were dispelled by a masterly exposition from

Bill Walker. I can recall most vividly the feeling of excitement, exhilaration and exuberance when the roll was called of representatives of 14 Commonwealth countries and it was resolved that a (British) Commonwealth Council for Educational Administration should be established.

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

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

Walker recalled:

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

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

1973: ACEA is founded

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

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

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

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

On Day 2, 18 May 1973, delegates resolved unanimously that a national body of educational administrators be established. Constituent groups were Queensland, Sydney, Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia, the ACT, Riverina and Darling Downs. Harry Harris (Sydney) was elected Foundation President and Bob Pearson (Queensland) Vice-

President. Among those who attended the inaugural meeting of the new ACEA Board, which met in Canberra on 19 November 1973, was the driving force behind ACEA'S establishment, Bill Walker. He later recalled that he came away from that meeting, humming to himself... "The country's in the best hands."

2002 A New Chapter Begins: The Name Change to ACEL

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

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

2008: ACEL Begins a New Chapter

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

A Statement of Commitment to the Profession of Teaching was developed by the Queensland Executive of the Australian Council for Educational Leaders (ACEL).
[https://media.ancel.org.au/Branch/QLD/Statement%20of%20Commitment%20\[v.3\].pdf](https://media.ancel.org.au/Branch/QLD/Statement%20of%20Commitment%20[v.3].pdf)

A STATEMENT OF COMMITMENT TO THE PROFESSION OF TEACHING

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The consultation, development and production of the statement were facilitated by the Australian Council for Educational Leaders (Queensland), April 2017

Context of the Statement

What is the Statement of Commitment?

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

Why was the Statement of Commitment developed?

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

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

Who has contributed to the development of the Statement?

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

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

How might the Statement of Commitment be used?

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

Leading & Managing

Journal of the Australian Council for Educational Leaders

Preparation of Manuscripts

Note 1: This Journal uses APA7 style and referencing, UK English.

Note 2: All submissions are completed on the Journal Website: <https://journals.flvc.org/leading-and-managing>

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The title should be concise and informative.

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A clear indication and an active e-mail address of the corresponding author

If available, the 16-digit ORCID of the author(s)

Word Length

Abstract: 150-200word – this is entered on a separate page.

Keywords

Please provide 4 to 6 keywords which can be used for indexing purposes.

Paper: 6,000 – 7,000 words

The word count includes: body text, tables, graphs, references, appendices, and any supplemental materials.

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Corresponding authors are required to declare any potential or perceived conflicts of interest in relation to the research during the submission process.

Funding

During the submission process, the Journal requires all authors to acknowledge any funding associated with their submission, including the funder details and grant/award number.

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This Journal uses APA7 formatting and referencing.

Text: new times roman, 12pts and double time spacing.

File formats - .DOC or .DOCX

Include all tables and figures in the paper.

Image format: TIFF or JPEG are preferred for pictures (containing no graphs or text). EPS is preferred for graphs and line art. No colour images.

AI

The use of AI must be declared.

Acknowledgements

An Acknowledgment section may be included to acknowledge, for example, people who have assisted with aspects of the work (but who do not qualify as authors), disclaimers, collaborations, etc.

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Under the heading “Statements and Declarations” for inclusion in the published paper: Declarations include Funding, Competing interests, Ethics approval, Consent, Data, Materials and/or Code availability and Authors’ contribution statements. Please use the title page for providing the statements.

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Leading & Managing, the academic journal of the Australian Council of Educational Leadership, accepts Commentaries for publication.

A Commentary is a short (2,000 words) Opinion-Ed piece which one might find on the Opinion page of *The Guardian* or the *New York Times*. It is not just a short journal article because it has no abstract, key words, or the usual traditional benchmarks for a research article which discusses methods, data analysis, or findings. And the references are limited to two or embedded in the Commentary.

Commentaries are expected to be highly readable, factual expositions of an informed, highly developed perspective presented in a concise, straight forward manner.

Commentaries are not peer reviewed nor are they reviews of the literature. Rather they are selected by the Editors as a perspective worth consideration in a larger context surrounding an important issue, event, or topic. They are welcome to be submitted at any time.

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Editorial

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